



University of  
Bedfordshire



# “It’s wrong... but you get used to it”

**A qualitative study of gang-associated  
sexual violence towards, and exploitation  
of, young people in England**

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# Foreword

This ground-breaking report confronts us with the appalling sexual and psychological violence occurring between young people living in gang-affected neighbourhoods. "Boys are predators, girls are prey, innit?" says one 16 year old boy in just one of many quotes from young people that are recorded faithfully.

The report is part of the Inquiry of the Office of the Children's Commissioner into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. It was commissioned because previous reports by ROTA (*Firmin 2010 and Firmin 2011*) provided compelling evidence that girls who are gang-associated can be treated as objects to be used, abused and discarded and in that process are victims of terrible sexual violence. Yet this problem has remained almost entirely invisible to many professionals charged with children's care and protection – police, youth justice, social care, education and health. Resources have been directed into dealing with gang-involved boys but little to date has happened to support girls and young women. Our aim was to reverse this trend and look at the impact of sexual violence on both girls and boys in gang-affected neighbourhoods.

Professors Jenny Pearce and John Pitts worked with a team of researchers led by Dr Helen Beckett, uncovering deeply disturbing evidence provided by the young people in this exemplary research. The aim was not to demonise either young people or the gangs with which they are associated. Rather, we aimed to explore the nature of sexual violence these young people experience, either as victims, perpetrators or as both.

Gangs are not simply a big city phenomenon. The Bedfordshire researchers spoke with young people living in gang-affected neighbourhoods in six different areas across England and the messages were similar wherever the gang was located and whatever its makeup.

This report exposes the particular use of sexual violence within the context of gangs.

For some of these children and young people, sexual violence – rape – is seen as a simple fact of everyday life, an inevitability from which there is no route out. However, we have also identified that the attitudes expressed in these pages reflect broader societal attitudes of young people who may not understand the meaning of 'consent' and may expect relationships to be violent. Our Inquiry has uncovered evidence showing appalling sexual bullying and sexist attitudes across all areas of the country and all social groupings.

We cannot afford to delude ourselves into thinking that the disturbing reality exposed in this report is confined to just a few trouble spots.

It is hard not to feel despair when reading this report. But we cannot afford the luxury of despair. The time for action is now.

Firstly, everyone must face up to the realities of sexual violence committed by some children and young people against other children and young people.

Secondly, adults must stand up and be counted. The belief that, as one girl put it, "we are objects" has not

sprung from nowhere. Such beliefs are bred, born, nurtured and promoted by adults who are often making vast sums of money in the process. The music and pornography industries, for example, have a great deal to answer for. We know from our report into the impact on children of viewing pornography (*Horvath et al, 2013*) including violent imagery, that most boys are viewing these materials and that there is a likely correlation between looking at and carrying out such acts. It is adults who make such films and adults who profit from them. So we adults must ask ourselves what kind of society we want – one where casual rape and sexual humiliation are daily facts of life or one where we respect each other and such harm is considered repugnant?

This report is above all about the abuse of power. Power and control exerted by those who perceive themselves to be strong against those perceived as weak. Difficult as it may be to accept, the boys who are gang-involved and perpetrate this violence are also invariably powerless within the wider context of society. They grow up on the margins, frequently living in fear, inevitably exerting their power where they can, invariably in perverted ways.

The final message therefore is that each of us has a role to play in combating the attitudes exposed in this report. From national and local government through to communities and individuals, we must support boys and young men to value healthy relationships and to understand 'consent'. We must work with all children to ensure women and girls are treated with respect, that there is a clear message that the sexual objectification of females will not be tolerated, and that children are brought up with hope and opportunities, channelling their energies and resourcefulness for their own and society's good.

I am profoundly indebted to the University of Bedfordshire team for this extraordinary research. It is a difficult and relentless read and it would have been even more difficult and painful for the team when listening to the young people's accounts. They have been faithful to the many young people who participated in this research, truly seeing them, hearing them, and attending to them. Their faith was repaid with trust and honesty and the accounts are stark. However, a research team comes in and then out of the lives of the researched. Those practitioners who work with and support the young people deserve our particular thanks and admiration. They continue to work beyond the life of a research project with those they seek to help.

This report is dedicated to all the young people in the six research sites who gave us their time and shared their life stories. Despair is not an option because giving up on our young people is not an option.

"I want a bright future" said one young woman. We owe her that.



**Sue Berelowitz**

Deputy Children's Commissioner for England and  
Chief Executive, Office of the Children's Commissioner

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# Abbreviations

CSEGG	Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (Inquiry)
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
EGYV	Ending Gang and Youth Violence
IASR	Institute of Applied Social Research
MAAG	Multi-agency Advisory Group
OCC	Office of Children's Commissioner for England
RPAG	Research Project Advisory Group
VAWG	Violence against women and girls
YPAG	Young People's Advisory Group

# Glossary

The terms that participants used are categorised here according to the context in which they used them. This may, or may not be, how these terms are defined or understood by others.

<i>People/issue being discussed</i>	<i>Descriptive terms used</i>
Fellow gang-members	Bredderin; Mandem; my people
Young people seeking to emulate the behaviours and attitudes of gang-involved youth	Wannabee/wannabees
Derogatory terms for young women with a perceived sexual reputation	Sket; Ho; Whore; Smig; Dirty girl; Nasty girl; Ting; Skank; Slag; Jeze
Young women associated through casual sex with one or more gang-involved young men	Link; Pass-around; Groupies; Hoodrats; Hood girls
Gang-involved young woman	Gangster girl
Young woman with child to gang-involved male	Baby mum or baby mother
Young women who (are used to) set up young men in rival gangs	Set up chicks; Honey traps
Have sexual intercourse	'Beat' her
Oral sex	Blow-job; Brain
Sexual activity with one person after another	Line-up; Train; Switching

# Acknowledgments

This work would not have taken place without the funding and support of the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England. We are grateful to the OCC for ensuring that the work could take place and for continuing to work on the implementation of recommendations arising. The Panel for the OCC Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups offered invaluable support and comment on the development of our work throughout.

The young people and those who work with and support them are at the core of this research project. The young people have been open and honest, giving up their time to talk to us about some very difficult issues to do with sexual violence and exploitation. It is hard to write a report that does justice to the experiences they convey. We hope that we have captured both some of the conflicts they experience as well as reflect their resilience and capacity to cope against great adversity. We thank the young people for supporting this work and we hope that some changes will be made for the better as result of their bravery and willingness to participate.

The project and support workers from the six sites within which the research has been located have enabled the work to take place. They have facilitated researchers' access to the young people and have helped to manage any child protection, safety or wellbeing issues that emerged throughout the research. They have provided ongoing support to young people as and when needed. This has often been despite very busy workloads, competing demands and pressures on limited resources. Our thanks go to all those practitioners who have supported the work and who continue to engage with the issues and promote excellent service delivery in the long term.

We would also like to thank all those who took part in the Multi Agency Advisory Groups in each site, the Research Advisory Group and the Young People's Advisory Group.

Their consideration of the design, implementation, analysis and dissemination of the research findings has been and continues to be invaluable.

We would like to recognise the work of the research team. Team work has been at the heart of the research process and all members of the team have maintained a professional approach to managing emotionally demanding issues, never failing to find an appropriate sense of humour when needed! The team would like to thank Cara Senouni for all her administrative and other never ending forms of support over the two year period and Mick Hart and his colleagues in reprographics for their help producing publicity materials over the time.

Dr Cathy Aymer worked with us as chair of the Research Project Advisory Group throughout the duration of the project, overseeing the work and providing excellent guidance throughout. Sadly, Cathy died recently. We would like to dedicate this report to her in recognition of the impact of her work on improving awareness and responses to disadvantaged young people, on challenging racism as experienced by many and on advancing the rights of the child within social work and related professions. Cathy, your work lives on!



Professor Jenny Pearce, Director of the International Centre: Researching Child Sexual Exploitation, Violence and Trafficking.

*With* Professor John Pitts  
Joint Principal Investigators

# Executive summary

## **“It’s wrong, but you get used to it”: A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England**

### About the study

1. The research was commissioned by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England as part of its Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. The research aimed to consider: the scale and nature of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation in six areas of England; the main pathways into gang-related sexual violence and exploitation for young people living in these neighbourhoods; and potential models for an effective multi-agency response to the issue.
2. The research took place between 2011 and 2013. Following an initial literature and policy review, individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with 188 young people, and focus groups with 76 professionals, from across the six research sites.
3. The young people who participated in the research interviews were aged 13 to 28 years, with half under the age of 18 and 21% under 16 years. There was an approximately equal gender split and a range of ethnicities were represented, reflecting the demography of the different research sites. For ethical reasons all young people were accessed through local services who could risk assess, and provide support for, their engagement in the research. Risks faced by other young people who may not be in touch with service providers, and therefore not included in this research, also need consideration.
4. Ethical approval was gained from four different Research Ethics Committees and relevant local approvals were obtained within each research site. The research team was accountable to a Research Project Advisory Group, a Young People’s Advisory Group and local Multi-agency Advisory Groups in each research site.
5. To maintain confidentiality and protect participants, the identity of the research sites is not being revealed. They do however reflect a broad range of experiences of working with gangs and different demographic profiles.
6. Most incidents are perpetrated by young men, against young women;
7. Young men are given freedom to be sexually active and receive credibility for this while young women are judged for, and frequently harmed as a result of, the same;
8. Nine out of ten interviewees identified male only, or predominantly male, gangs. Risks of sexual violence and exploitation are heightened within the hyper-masculine environment of these gangs.
9. Most incidents take place between young people who are known to each other within the gang environment, rather than involving strangers within the wider community;
10. Victimisation occurs both on and off line;
11. Young people are rarely reporting these experiences or accessing any formal support services for these. This is particularly pertinent for young men.

**There are significant levels of sexual victimisation within the gang-environment and young women are at particular risk**

### Findings

**Gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation must be viewed within wider patterns of sexual harm and victimisation between young people**

6. Gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation does not occur in a vacuum – it is influenced both by the wider gang environment and wider patterns of sexual violence and exploitation in society. Like sexual violence more generally:
  - Gender power dynamics influence young men’s and young women’s risk of sexual victimisation;
  - 65% shared examples of young women being pressurised or coerced into sexual activity. As noted by an 18 year old young man: *“once they’ve implemented that fear into them it’s easy to get what you want”*;
  - 50% identified examples of sex in return for status or protection. Whilst this is not unique to the gang environment, in a world where ‘respect’ and ‘status’ are seen as essential, the need to achieve these is acutely heightened;



- 41% shared examples of individual perpetrator rape; 34% shared examples of multiple perpetrator rape. Some were explicitly conceptualised as rape, and noted to be motivated by a desire for retribution or control. Many others were viewed as 'normal' sexual behaviours with little recognition of the fact that the absence of consent constituted a sexual offence. As noted by a 15 year old young woman: *"He feels in control of the streets anyway ...so he'll want things to go his way, so he won't be thinking 'oh this is rape', when it actually is"*;
- 39% identified examples of the exchange of sex for tangible goods such as drugs and/or alcohol or the discharge of an associated debt; 23% noted exchange of sex for money;
- 31% noted examples of young women being used to attract and then 'set up' males from rival gangs to be assaulted;
- 30% shared examples of a young man having sex with a young woman (usually a familial relative of a rival gang-involved young man) to 'disrespect' a rival gang member. As noted by a 17 year old male: *"You're kind of like fucking his sister just to violate him, just to take the piss out of him really"*;
- 11% identified examples of rape or other sexual assaults under threat of a weapon;
- 7% shared examples of young women having to have sex with more than one gang member to become part of the gang: *"She had sex with every boy in a gang just to be part of their gang...I think it was probably under pressure, because she wanted to be part of them"* (15 year old young woman).

12. There are often blurred boundaries between young people's experiences of being either a victim or a perpetrator of sexual violence, with many young people (including young men) experiencing both. Parallels can be seen with other forms of peer-on-peer sexual violence in this regard.

### Young women's exposure to risk varies according to their status

13. Young women's exposure to sexual violence and exploitation varied according to their status and role within the gang. Five different roles were identified for young women, although it was noted that they may be in several different roles at any one time, or move between these over time:
- 'Gangster girls': young women who adopt male personas, and as a result, are generally protected from sexual victimisation;
  - Female family members: seemingly protected within the gang but at risk from rival gangs because of their relationship with a gang-involved male;
  - 'Wifey's' (girlfriends): often protected within the gang so long as the relationship lasted, but frequently exposed to domestic violence and at high risk of sexual victimisation should a relationship end. Also at risk from rival gangs;

- 'Baby-mothers' (young women who have children with gang-involved males): similar risks to 'wifey's and 'links' depending on their original status;
- 'Links' (young women associated through 'casual' sex with one or more members of the gang). This was the group most at risk of sexual victimisation both within the gang and from rival gangs:

*"She goes in narrow-mindedly thinking these people are going to look after me and they care about me... but they just want to sleep with her... and [she] usually ends up getting a name... whore, sket, dirty girl, smig" (27 year old young man)*

*"Your main girlfriend you go for meals with... then you'll have other girlfriends... selling weed, holding stuff... sleeping with them and stuff" (24 year old young man)*

*"She weren't going out with anyone, but she like used to sleep with just one gang... and this other gang... they seen her on the bus, dragged her off the bus, took her to... someone's house or whatever, made her like suck all their dicks and all that" (19 year old young woman).*

14. Young women spoke of their safety and reputation being dependent upon distancing themselves from 'links'. They were fearful of being 'vulnerable by association', thus further isolating 'links' from female support.

### Young women are frequently blamed for the harm they experience

15. Many young women are both harmed and blamed by both young men and other young women for their experiences of sexual victimisation. Asked to consider reasons for sexual violence, 46% said that they, or others, thought the victim in some way 'deserved it' or 'asked for it'. For example, describing a young woman as wearing revealing clothing, an 18 year old young man explained *"to some people that would be begging to say 'come and get me, I'm open for it.'"*
16. This was particularly true of young women who were sexually active with more than one person. They were viewed as having less right to withhold consent, and seen to bring harm upon themselves because of their presentation or previous sexual experiences. This is despite the fact that many interviewees said that sex with these young women often took place under pressure or coercion. As noted by a 17 year old young man: *"If she looks like a ho then the boys will treat her like a ho... and she has no choice but to accept how they're treating her."*

### Young people assume that sexual violence is 'normal' and inevitable

17. Many young people viewed rape and sexual assault as 'normal' sexual behaviour with, as noted, little recognition of the meaning of a sexual offence:

*They might be saying no, but they don't have the power to push them off, and I think sometimes a lot of guys don't realise in their minds that it is actually rape" (19 year old young woman).*

18. Young women's responses to such sexual victimisation were, for the most part, fatalistic: *"I'm used to it...It's normal...It's wrong, but you get used to it...Welcome to our generation"* (young women's focus group).

**Incidents are not being reported or adequately identified**

19. Only 1 in 12 interviewees felt that young people would be likely to report, or talk about, experiences of sexual violence or exploitation and even where they felt a young person would talk, they thought this would be to a peer rather than a professional.
20. There are a variety of reasons for this including:
- resignation to, or normalisation of, sexual violence and related experiences;
  - fear of judgement by others;
  - fear of retribution or retaliation; and
  - a lack of confidence in services' ability to protect them.
21. In the main, cases of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are not being proactively identified by professional services. This is, in part, because of young people's acceptance of violence as inevitable, and the difficulties they face in reporting it. It is also because of a lack of processes for proactive identification.

## Summary recommendations

22. Every school, education and health provider, youth service and other relevant universal service needs to promote understanding of healthy relationships, the concept of consent and the harm caused by rape and sexual assault.
23. Every school and education provider must develop and implement whole school approaches to address all forms of sexual violence and exploitation, including sexualised bullying and coercive behaviour.
24. All 'Ending Gang and Youth Violence' areas should profile their street gangs with reference to sexual exploitation; identify girls and women associated with gang members; and link strategies that tackle serious youth and/or gang violence with those combating child sexual exploitation.
25. Every Local Authority with a gang-affected neighbourhood – as part of their multi-agency gang work – should have trained and supported mentors and advocates to support young people who are at risk of becoming, or are, gang-involved or affected by gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation.

# Chapter 1: Context to the Study

## 1.1 Introduction

This research into children and young people's experiences of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation was commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (OCC) as part of their Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (CSEGG). It has been conducted over the two-year period of the Inquiry (Autumn 2011 to Autumn 2013) by an independent, experienced, multi-disciplinary team of researchers from the Institute of Applied Social Research (IASR) at the University of Bedfordshire.

The research has a narrower focus than the Inquiry under which it was commissioned, considering only those forms of sexual exploitation and sexual violence occurring in, or related to, gangs (as defined in section 1.3 below). As the prevalence and nature of such gangs varies significantly across the country, exposure to these forms of abuse also varies for young people living in different communities and locales.

In recognition of the differing gang histories and experiences in different areas of England, fieldwork has been undertaken in six different gang-affected areas across the country. The identity of the sites is not being released in order to maintain confidentiality and protect participants; they do however reflect a broad range of experiences and different demographic profiles (see section 1.8).

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the primary data collection tools were those of individual interviews, focus groups with young people and focus groups with professionals. A total of 188 young people and 76 professionals participated across these three elements of the study, considering both the nature of the issues under review and potential responses to these.

## 1.2 Research aims and objectives

Whilst increasing consideration has been given to (i) child sexual exploitation, (ii) sexual violence and (iii) gang-associated activity, as separate causes for concern in recent years, knowledge about the relationship between them remains limited. The overall aim of the research was therefore to provide a greater understanding of the links between these issues, the ways in which young people can be affected by them and how this might be better responded to. Specific objectives within this were to consider:

- The scale and nature of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation in the specific areas of England under study;
- The main pathways into gang-related sexual violence and exploitation for young people living in these gang-affected neighbourhoods; and
- Potential models for an effective multi-agency response to the issue (considering prevention, identification and support, and exit strategies).

During the process of the research, other important contextual issues also emerged that were consequently integrated into the study design. These included:

- Routes into the gang environment;
- Gender norms within the gang environment;
- Wider patterns of violence within the gang environment;
- Wider patterns of sexual violence and exploitation experienced by young people;
- Young people's understanding of consent; and
- Patterns of reporting.

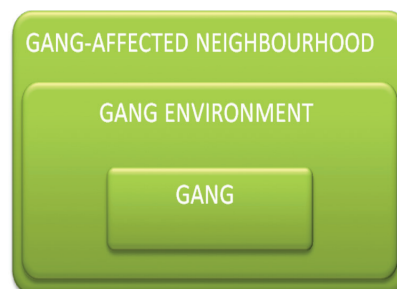
## 1.3 Terminology

Given the definitional confusion frequently demonstrated in discussions about gangs or sexual exploitation/sexual violence, it is important to clarify the terminology employed within this project:

**Gang:** The definition of gang adopted within the study is that of a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with, or lay claim over, territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other similar gangs (Pitts 2008; *The Centre for Social Justice* 2009).<sup>1</sup>

**Gang-involved and gang-associated:** For the purposes of this research, the term gang-involved is used to describe those who view themselves, and are viewed by others, as a member of a gang and are actively involved in gang-related activities with other members. Many, but not necessarily all of these young people, will be known to the authorities as gang nominals. The term gang-associated is used to describe those young people who have some form of association with a gang or gang-involved individuals, but do not see themselves, and are not seen by others, as members of that gang.

**Gang environment:** The term gang environment is used to describe the immediate social reach of the gang. It is a wider concept than that of the gang, including all those who spend time within that environment, but narrower than the commonly used concept of a gang-affected neighbourhood that includes all who live in that geographical location irrespective of their level of contact with the gang (see Figure 1.1 below).



**Figure 1.1:**  
*The gang environment*

<sup>1</sup> The current ACPO definition of gangs (released post commencement of the study) only stipulates that criteria one and two are present; noting that criteria three to five may or may not be present (*Home Office* 2012).

**Sexual exploitation:** As per the 2009 Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Guidance, sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 is defined as involving exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities... In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability (DCSF 2009:9).

**Sexual violence:** The term sexual violence incorporates any behaviour that is perceived to be of a sexual nature, which is unwanted or takes place without consent or understanding (DHSSPSNI 2008). As illustrated in Figure 1.2 below it is a wider concept than that of child sexual exploitation that, when applied to the experiences of adolescents, should be done so with regard to wider societal structures of sexual violence and gender inequality.



**Figure 1.2: Sexual violence and exploitation**

**Young person/people:** Although statutorily a child until they reach their eighteenth birthday, this report refers to adolescents as young people rather than children. This is not to undermine the rights and protections due them as children, but to recognise the distinct safeguarding needs of this age-group (as opposed to those of younger children), their differential levels of development and the need for a more nuanced age-appropriate response.

## 1.4 Context

### Q. How many youth gangs are there?

While there is no comprehensive national figure of the number of gangs, or the number of young people involved or associated with gangs, we do know that:

- In 2012, the London Metropolitan Police Service reported that they had identified 259 violent youth gangs and 4,800 'gang-nominals' in 19 gang-affected boroughs. These gangs ranged from organised criminal networks involved in class A drug dealing and firearms supply, to street gangs perpetrating violence and robbery and were noted to be responsible for 17% of

robberies, 50% of shootings and 14% of rapes in the Capital (Pitts 2012)

- In 2013, in response to a request for information from the OCC CSEGG Inquiry, 21 police forces in England identified a total of 323 gangs within their areas<sup>2</sup> (OCC 2013)
- Police in London and Strathclyde identified 171 and 170 gangs respectively and noted that up to 6% of 10-19 year olds self-report belonging to a gang (The Centre for Social Justice 2009).

### Q. Why might young people become involved in gangs?

There is some tension between accounts which locate responsibility for gang behaviour with the individual or family, and others that locate responsibility on the impact of social, environmental and economic deprivation. These are not, however, necessarily mutually exclusive arguments. Research shows that the impact of deprivation and limited employment opportunities provides a context where the informal economy and gang-related criminality thrives (Pitts 2008) and gangs have been noted to be in some of the most deprived areas of the country (Home Office 2011). Experiencing personal difficulties and/or growing up within a family that is experiencing multiple problems can further enhance young people's vulnerability to gang involvement (Khan et al 2013).

### Q. Who becomes involved in gangs?

Typical gang members have been described as being aged between 12 and 25, predominantly male, living in large cities (invariably near or in deprived areas) and disengaged from education, training or employment (The Centre for Social Justice 2009). Overall, the ethnicity of those involved or associated with gangs tends to reflect that of the population living in that area. The higher proportion of black young offenders and gang members overall reflects the disproportionate presence of black communities in deprived inner-city neighbourhoods (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2007, The Centre for Social Justice 2009).

### Q. Is it only young men who are affected by gangs?

UK studies of gangs have primarily focused on the involvement of, and impact upon, boys and young men (see Pearce and Pitts 2011/2013). However, a number of recent studies have highlighted the lived significance of gangs for young women, either as a result of their own involvement or as a consequence of their association (familial or otherwise) with a gang-involved male (Firmin 2010, 2011; Centre for Social Justice 2012; Khan et al 2013). The latter of these studies identified that young women (with a mean age of 15 years) with health and social difficulties had a higher risk of getting involved in gangs. Considering the experiences of such young women, both Firmin and Khan et al's studies highlight the significant levels of harm and victimisation that young women can experience within the gang environment, including exposure to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse.

<sup>2</sup> This may include a degree of double-counting if a gang spanned more than one police area.



## **Q. What do we know about the prevalence of child sexual exploitation and violence?**

Although the particular focus of this study is on gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation it is critical that this is located within knowledge of wider patterns of the sexual victimisation of children and peer on peer sexual violence. Available research clearly illustrates significant levels of sexual violence against young people although, as noted below, these are understood to only represent the tip of the iceberg. Data is restricted to that which is reported. We have little data of the extent of sexual violence associated with issues such as 'honour' based violence or forced marriage. There are also significant knowledge gaps about sexual violence perpetrated against boys and young men or children with disabilities or that occurring within same-sex relationships (*Meetoo and Mirza 2007; Pipe et al 2007; Allnock 2010; Melrose and Pearce 2013; Sharpe 2013*).

### **Recorded sexual crimes against children:**

- 18,915 sexual crimes against children under 16 years were recorded in England and Wales in 2012/13. This equates to 35% of all sexual crimes (*Office for National Statistics 2013*);
- Police recorded over 23,000 sex offences against children aged under 18 years in England and Wales between April 2012 and March 2013 (*NSPCC 2013*).

### **Child sexual exploitation statistics:**

- CEOP identified 1875 cases of localised grooming (*CEOP 2011*);
- The report of phase one of the OCC Inquiry identified 2409 confirmed victims of child sexual exploitation, and 16,500 young people at risk of the same. This included 533 cases of gang-associated child sexual exploitation (*OCC 2012*);
- Social workers reported child sexual exploitation to be an issue of concern for 1 in 7 young people known to social services in Northern Ireland (*Beckett 2011*).

### **Peer-on-peer abuse statistics:**

- An NSPCC survey of 1353 17 year olds in England, Scotland and Wales identified violence in young people's relationships to be a significant welfare problem particularly for young women. One in three girls and one in six boys, aged 13-17 years, reported experiencing some form of sexual partner violence (*Barter et al 2009*).
- Work by Hackett (2011) argues that the majority of children with harmful sexual behaviours are male and that most young people with violent offences victimise children known to them within the family or community (out of 402 alleged incidents, only 3% involved strangers).
- 1 in 15 young people who responded to the Young Life and Times Survey said that they had been given drugs or alcohol and then taken advantage off when under the influence of these – this was perpetrated by a peer in 7 out of 10 cases (*Beckett and Schubotz 2013*).

It is widely acknowledged that the actual numbers of recorded incidents of rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse are a gross-underestimation of the extent of interpersonal violence. A large-scale study by the NSPCC found that 72 per cent of sexually abused children did not tell anyone about their abuse (*Cawson et al 2000*). Follow-up research in 2009 found that 1 in 9 of the 1,761 young adults (aged 18 to 24) surveyed said they had experienced some form of contact sexual abuse during childhood (*NSPCC 2011*). Considering sexual violence more generally, a 2007 Government report estimated that between 75 and 95 percent of rape crimes are never reported to the police (*HMIC 2007*). Domestic violence (now extended to include those aged 16 and above) is also chronically under-reported with victims experiencing an average of 35 incidents of abuse before reporting to the police (*Yearnshaw 1997*).

## **Q. What is being done about this?**

Recent years have seen increased attention on both the issues of gangs and sexual exploitation and sexual violence, although as noted above, generally only as distinct concerns. There have been a number of initiatives over the last few years by a range of statutory bodies to tackle both gang-involvement and the prevalence of child sexual exploitation and sexual violence. More recently, there have also been encouraging developments in terms of a recognition of, and initial response to, the specific issue of sexual violence and exploitation within gangs under the cross-Government Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme. Pertinent initiatives include:

- The commitments to supporting young people to avoid and exit gangs articulated in the Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV): One Year on Report (2012) and the provision of funding to 33 priority areas;
- The establishment of a Women, Girls and Gangs Working Group within the Home Office in Spring 2012;
- The updated Violence against Women and Girls Action Plan and stated cross-departmental commitment to delivery of these objectives;
- The provision of three years of Home Office funding for 13 Young People's Advocates to provide dedicated support to young people who have been victims, or are at risk of, sexual violence and/or exploitation particularly by gangs. The Advocates also provide professional training and support local partners to develop co-ordinated responses to the issue within their area;
- The delivery of training to the 33 EGYV priority areas on working with victims of sexual exploitation and working with gang-associated young women and girls;
- The specific integration of the issue of gang-associated young women and girls into the EGYV peer review process;
- The commencement of work by the Home Office and ACPO to define and map gang-associated women and girls against gang nominals;

- The commitment to updating the Safeguarding Guidance on Children and Young People at Risk of Gang Activity to ensure it addresses the needs of gang-associated young women and girls; and
- The commitment to build work with boys and young men into policy development and support and advice to EGYV priority areas so that issues around harmful attitudes towards women and girls are addressed.

Whilst these positive developments and articulated commitments are clearly to be welcomed, they need to be further rolled out and delivered within the context of a sustained multi-agency systemic response to the issue that engages with the complexities of the issue at both a national and local level. As seen by the content of the research outlined in this report and the overall findings from the OCC CSEGG Inquiry there is a long way to go before children and young people are able to recognise, report and feel supported to move away from sexual violence, exploitation and abuse in gang-affected neighbourhoods.

## 1.5 Research governance

The conduct of the research was aided and kept under review by a number of different bodies throughout the duration of the study:

- **Research Project Advisory Group:** An overarching Research Project Advisory Group (RPAG) was established for the duration of the project. The group included representation from each of the six research sites together with a range of other professionals working across the fields of research, policy and practice. The RPAG was independently chaired by Professor Cathy Aymer from Brunel University.
- **Young People's Advisory Group:** A Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG) was also established to advise on the conduct and dissemination of the research, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that the focus of the research remained child and young person-centred and creating outputs for young people.
- **Site specific Multi-agency Advisory Groups:** Mindful of the variation in systems and experiences across the different research sites, local Multi-agency Advisory Groups (MAAGs) were established in each site. The purpose of these MAAGs was to steer and support the research within their local site, ensuring that relevant local issues were taken into account when planning the research. They also provided a forum whereby agencies working in that site could begin to consider the longer-term implications of the research.

The research also received formal ethical/governance approvals from the following bodies:

- The Institute of Applied Social Research Ethics Committee;
- The University of Bedfordshire Research Ethics Committee;

- The Association of Directors of Children's Services Research Group;
- Barnardo's Research Ethics Committee; and
- Individual Local Authority governance bodies in three of the six research sites.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.6 Methodology and associated ethical considerations

The research involved a number of complementary data gathering exercises conducted in different phases over the two year period of the research. These included:

- A policy/literature review;<sup>4</sup>
- Collation of publicly available contextual quantitative data on site demographics and the issues under study;
- Additional data requests to local sites to map patterns of collated data on gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation;
- Individual interviews with 150 young people;
- 11 focus groups with 76 professionals; and
- Eight single-sex focus groups with 38 young people.

The sensitive nature of the research, the potential vulnerability of research participants and the multi-site nature of the work inevitably raised both practical and ethical challenges that needed to be addressed in undertaking the work. Care was therefore taken to incorporate processes that could facilitate resolution of these issues, minimise the potential for further ethical dilemmas to arise and, where these should arise, ensure they were appropriately responded to.

The guiding principle of the research was that no harm should come to any individual as a result of their agreement to facilitate or take part in the work. A detailed ethical protocol was developed on the basis of this, and adhered to throughout the research.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.6.1 Interviews with young people

Interviews with young people constituted the primary focus of the fieldwork. Given the sensitivity of the topic under review and the potential negative implications associated with discussing these issues, care was taken to identify an appropriate, minimal-risk means of eliciting young people's perspectives within the research interview environment. An important safeguard in this respect was the commitment that all potential participants would be accessed through agencies that could advise of any potential risks associated with involvement in the research, and ensure appropriate follow-up support was in place. Whilst recognising that this introduces an inevitable degree of bias into the sample - and excludes other potential participants with valid contributions to offer - it was felt that the risks of engaging those outside of services could not be adequately negated within a time-limited, large-scale, multi-site project such as this.

<sup>3</sup> The other three research sites provided permission to proceed without any additional local requirements, on the basis of the existing approvals obtained.

<sup>4</sup> This is available to download from [www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/centres/intcent](http://www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/centres/intcent)

<sup>5</sup> A copy of the Ethical Protocol is available to download from [www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/centres/intcent](http://www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/centres/intcent)

## *Approach to interviewing*

Interview schedules and accompanying information materials were designed in partnership with young people from the YPAG in order to ensure age appropriateness. To make the interviews as comfortable as possible for participants, they were conducted in a way that allowed young people to comment on issues in the third person, unless they actively chose to do otherwise. Interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, using the interview schedule as a framework for discussion rather than a verbatim script. The phrasing and focus of questions were adapted according to the comprehension and experiences of the participant and materials were translated where required.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. They were conducted on an individual basis in order to limit the number of people hearing what a young person shared, although a small number of participants did avail themselves of the option of having a worker present with them for support. For reasons of safety (of both participants and researchers) all interviews were conducted in staffed premises. Participants were given a £10 High Street voucher in recognition of their contribution to the research, but were not informed about this prior to their decision to participate.

Issues of language and perception are of vital importance in a project like this. Although the primary focus of the research was that of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation, this was explored within the wider context of 'relationships, sex and gangs: the good and the bad' in interviews and focus groups with young people. This was in order to make the topic more accessible for participants (on the basis that 'sexual exploitation' is not a meaningful term for many young people) and to broaden the range of experiences that they may interpret as relevant to the research. This is important given that many young people do not necessarily recognise the exploitation or violence inherent in their circumstances or experiences. Such an approach also helped illuminate the wider context within which sexual violence and exploitation is occurring for young people living in gang-affected neighbourhoods.

Care also had to be exercised in relation to the use of the term 'gang' in interviews and focus groups, both in terms of variable understandings as to what this term means and in terms of a resistance to labelling on the part of many participants. Many young people actively resisted the application of this term to the experiences they discussed, even though what they described clearly fitted the definition of gang applied within the research. It is likely that there were a range of reasons for this including the 'third person' approach to interviewing that did not require self-disclosure of gang-involvement/association, a desire to avoid drawing attention to their gang-related activity and an avoidance of stereotyping as a result of this. Where such resistance occurred, the researchers refrained from imposing an externally determined label on participants' experiences, adopting instead the language they chose to use to describe their

experiences (their people, their friends, repping or 'on the road', for example).

## *Informed consent*

Young people were provided with a written information leaflet about, and verbal explanation of, the study on two separate occasions – firstly, by the worker making the initial approach about the study, and again, by the researcher, prior to the commencement of the interview. Questions were encouraged and once the researcher had outlined the content of the consent form and was satisfied that the young person was in a position to offer free and informed consent to participate, this consent was recorded in writing.

Where young people were aged under 16 years, parent/carer consent was also obtained (in addition to that of the young person) unless this was deemed contrary to the best interests of the child. For those aged under 13, opt-in parental consent was obtained; for those aged 13-15, opt-out consent was obtained unless the policy of the facilitating agency required otherwise.

Viewing consent as an ongoing process rather than a discrete event, active steps were taken to maximise the control that young people retained over their contributions, with time taken to explore how to safely talk about these sensitive issues within the interview environment. Participants were advised that they could terminate the interview at any point and/or decline to answer any questions posed. Recognising that some participants may inadvertently share more than they planned to, researchers also checked with each individual at the end of their interview whether they had shared anything that they would rather not be used in the research. Any material designated as such was not included in the research. Participants were also advised that they could withdraw their contribution within one month of their interview and advised as to how to do this, both verbally and in writing.

## *Confidentiality and anonymity*

In sensitive research of this nature it is essential to assure participants that what they tell researchers will remain confidential (wherever possible) and that they will not be identified in any documents that are destined for the public domain.<sup>6</sup> Participants were given this assurance both verbally and in writing, with the exceptions to this clearly highlighted prior to the commencement of both interviews and focus groups. These exceptions are constituted by the researchers' duty to inform in situations where information is disclosed suggesting that a child/young person or vulnerable adult is suffering, or at risk of suffering, serious harm (as defined by the Children and Young Person Act 1989) or where wider issues of public protection are raised and give cause for concern.

Passing on disclosures can have significant implications for young people, both positive and negative. The risk

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6 As agreed with participants, contributions are only identified by age and gender within this report, and not by research site or any other feature that might contribute to their potential identification.



associated with this is particularly pertinent when dealing with young people who are gang-associated and/or at risk from more than one individual in terms of potential for retribution. Care was therefore taken to ensure that the confidentiality offered, and in particular the limitations to this, were presented in appropriate language that made sense to young people participating in the research. Time was taken at the start of both interviews and focus groups not only to ensure that they understood this, but also to explore with them how to talk about these issues without triggering disclosures, unless they wished to do so. In the rare occasions where a disclosure did occur, the participant was reminded of the researcher's duty to pass this information on and kept informed as the process progressed.

### 1.6.2 Focus groups with young people

Following analysis of the interview data, a total of eight focus groups were conducted with 38 young people in different research sites in order to consider emerging themes and what effective responses to these might look like. It is recognised that bringing people together in a focus group environment can present additional risks and complexities. This is particularly the case in a sensitive study such as this. For this reason young people's focus groups were only undertaken with existing groups of young people run by partner agencies and conducted on a single-sex basis. Participants were discouraged from talking about their personal experiences or circumstances, given the group environment, but encouraged to focus instead on what they felt should be done about the issues emerging from the research.

### 1.6.3 Focus groups with professionals

A total of 11 focus groups were also conducted with 76 professionals across the six research sites, with the similar purpose of considering emerging themes and issues and what effective responses to these might look like. Potential participants for professional focus groups were identified via the local MAAGs and included representation from the fields of social care, education, health, policing and the justice system, together with those working specifically in the gangs and sexual exploitation/sexual violence fields.

## 1.7 Analysis and presentation of data

The main phases of the research – individual interviews and focus groups – were primarily qualitative in nature. The rich data emerging from these aspects of the research were thematically analysed using the qualitative computer package NVIVO 8 and provide the primary underpinning of the research findings presented throughout the remaining chapters of this report.

Given the in-depth experiences and perspectives that were shared by participants, and the fact that they

are best placed to articulate the lived reality of their experiences, a conscious decision has been made to prioritise the inclusion of young people's voices within the report.<sup>7</sup> The reader should, however, be aware that some of the quotations presented in the report include potentially offensive language and describe harmful experiences and attitudes that they may find distressing.

Although primarily a qualitative study, some quantitative data were also collated during the interview phase of the work, and analysed using SPSS version 19. These data included:

- Self-disclosed demographic participant data; and
- Quantitative coding frames, completed on a selection of qualitative interview transcripts, recording the nature of issues covered in that interview.

The completion of quantitative coding frames was introduced in an attempt to provide some form of numerical count as to the relative prevalence of concerns about specific issues across the range of individual interviews (the proportions identifying examples of multiple perpetrator rape compared to sexually-based initiation processes, for example). Quantitative coding frames were completed on 131 of the 150 interviews; namely those interviews where participants indicated some form of direct connection with a gang or gang-involved individual(s).<sup>8</sup>

Due to the flexibility built into the interviewing process, not all issues were covered with all of these interviewees. The prevalence data presented throughout the remainder of this report are therefore collated on the basis of the sub-set of interviewees who discussed the particular theme being considered (motivations for sexual violence, for example; indicated by n=\* in the text), rather than the full coding frame sample of 131 participants or the full research sample of 150 participants.

## 1.8 Site overview

As previously highlighted, the identity of the six research sites involved in the research is being kept confidential. This is primarily motivated by a desire to protect participants' identities, given the potential risks associated with identification, and to offer a sufficient level of anonymity to allow participants to feel able to safely engage in the study. Some general commentary can, however, be offered as to the nature of the sites engaged in the research and the similarities and variations within these.

The six research sites were located in different geographical areas within England and included inner-city, suburban and semi-rural conurbations. All contained pockets of acute social deprivation, within which identified gangs were primarily located, although the degree to which this was part of a wider pattern of social deprivation varied across the sites. All of the research sites had an identified issue with gangs (either

7 As part of the anonymity commitment made to participants, all contributions within the report are presented with reference only to a randomly allocated participant code and the age and gender of the contributor.

8 The 19 interviews on which coding frames were not completed were those young people who lived in gang-affected neighbourhoods but did not identify any direct links with gangs (see section 1.9).



within, or adjacent to and impacting upon, their area) although the manifestation of this varied across sites. Some of the areas had a long history of gangs, whilst for others gangs were a relatively recent phenomenon. Some had established structures for responding to 'the gang problem' whilst others were still in the more developmental stages of a response.

The ethnic composition of those young people involved in the gangs varied across the different research sites and generally closely reflected the demography of the local area in which they were operating. The gender composition of gangs varied less, with most being exclusively or primarily male dominated, although young women were noted to be associated with, and consequently at risk from, gangs across all of the six research sites.

Sexual exploitation and sexual violence was a recognised issue of concern across all six research sites, although different sites exhibited varying degrees of development in terms of their responses to these issues. This was true both of their understanding of the specific presentation of the issue within their local area and the relative engagement of different partners in responding to this.

1.9 Interview participants

Face to face individual interviews were conducted with 150 young people across the six research sites. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 28 years, with half under the age of 18 years (see Table 1.1). Just over half (52%) were male, with the remaining 48% female. A range of ethnicities were represented within the sample (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.1: Age-breakdown of interviewees

13 to 15 years of age	21%
16 or 17 years of age	28%
18 to 20 years of age	28%
21 to 25 years of age	21%
Over 25 years of age	2%

Table 1.2: Self-reported ethnicity of interviewees

Black/Black British	32%
White	28%
Dual heritage	21%
Asian/Asian British	18%

Most participants reported that they were in some form of education (45%), training (20%) or employment (18%), with only one in eight identifying as NEET. Just over one-third (38%) reported current or previous involvement with children's services, whilst two-fifths (40%) reported history of criminality.<sup>9</sup>

The vast majority of young people who participated in interviews (87%; n=131) had direct, often multiple, connections with gangs and as such are well placed to comment on the subject under investigation. Of these 131 interviewees:

- 59% were/had been directly involved in a gang (70% males .v. 47% females);
- 32% were/had been gang-associated (25% males .v. 39% females);
- 35% had friends and/or family involved (no significant gender differences);
- 23% were having/had previously had a 'romantic relationship' with a gang-involved person (all female bar one);
- 57% had personal experience of sex and/or relationships in gangs.

A further 13% (n=19) of participants grew up in gang-affected neighbourhoods but did not identify any personal direct links with gangs. These young people were included in the study to enable exploration of the impact of these issues upon the wider community and have offered valid contributions in this regard, but had only indirect knowledge of the core issues under consideration. For this reason, their contributions have only been included in the more contextual elements of the study, rather than assimilate them with those accounts provided by those with more direct knowledge or experience of the core issues.

**Interpreting the data:** The interview findings presented throughout this report accurately capture the perspectives and experiences of the young people who participated in interviews across the six research sites. Whilst there is much pertinent learning within these for other young people's experiences of these issues, the nature of the sample – opportune; accessed through agencies; willing to participate in a research interview; with varying degrees of closeness to the issue – must be borne in mind when considering the wider implications of the findings.

1.10 Report structure

Having outlined the process of, and relevant background to, the conduct of the research within this introductory chapter, the remainder of the report considers the findings of the study and required responses to this.

**Chapter Two** provides an overview of the key contextual factors that should be borne in mind when considering the forms of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation subsequently explored in Chapter three. Recognising that young women are the main victims of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation,

9 The proportions with a history of involvement with children's services and/or a history of criminality may well be higher, as these figures are based only on what participants were willing to disclose at the point of interview.

the chapter locates these experiences within a wider discussion about gender and the gang. It considers the myriad of ways in which young women can be both harmed and blamed within the gang environment and the ways in which a lack of understanding about mutually respectful sex and relationships can contribute to this. It also considers the ways in which the adoption of a conflict mentality can contribute to an increased permissiveness of violence and exploitation, and the ways in which wider patterns of sexual violence and exploitation experienced by young people interact with this environment.

**Chapter Three** explores the various forms of sexual violence and exploitation identified as impacting upon both young men and young women within the gang environment. Having outlined the difficulties associated with trying to ascertain the prevalence of these experiences, the chapter considers the forms of sexual violence and exploitation impacting upon young women within the gang environment and the ways in which exposure to these issues is influenced by their status and role. Acknowledging that sexual victimisation is not only experienced by young women, the chapter concludes with an exploration of participants' contributions on the likelihood and nature of sexual violence towards young men within the gang environment.

**Chapter Four** moves beyond the actual experience of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation to consider how such incidents are being responded to, both by young people themselves and by professionals. The chapter begins with a consideration of why young people rarely disclose and seek support for such experiences. Proceeding from this basis, it considers how services are currently identifying and engaging with the issues under consideration, and how they might better do so in future. Due to both the need to protect the anonymity of sites, and the lack of specificity within much of the commentary offered by participants, this analysis is primarily high-level in nature, presented on a cross-site basis as opposed to a detailed critique of responses within any one research site.

**Chapter Five** presents a series of recommendations as to how responses to these issues could be improved.

# Chapter 2: Gender and the Gang

## Key messages

1. Gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation does not occur in a vacuum – it is influenced both by behavioural norms within the wider gang environment and wider patterns of child sexual exploitation and violence.
2. Although young men experience many different forms of harm and victimisation within the gang environment, they appear less likely to experience sexually based forms than young women.
3. Young women's access to, and position within, the patriarchal gang environment is predominantly mediated through, and determined by, young men. The accompanying objectification and perceived inferiority of many young women holds serious implications for their risk of violence and victimisation (sexual and otherwise) within the gang environment.
4. Young women's exposure to other forms of violence and victimisation within the gang environment can shape both their risk of, and responses to, sexual harm.
5. Many young women are both harmed and blamed. This is particularly true of those with a perceived sexual reputation, who are often viewed as having brought the harm upon themselves as a result of their presentation or previous experiences.
6. Levels of sexual violence and exploitation are impacted by an apparent lack of understanding of consent, and the ways in which contextual factors can impact upon a person's ability to grant or withhold this. As explored in Chapter Three, this is particularly problematic within group-based scenarios.

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a brief overview of some of the key contextual factors that should be borne in mind when considering the issue of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation, as subsequently explored in Chapter three. Having briefly outlined the nature of the gangs identified within the research and some of the reasons why young people may become involved or associated with these, the chapter considers the importance of gender constructions within the gang environment and the consequent variable experiences of young men and young women within this.

Whilst not denying young men's exposure to violence and victimisation within the gang environment (sexual and otherwise), the chapter focuses on the positioning and consequent experiences of young women within the gang environment, on the basis that they account for the

vast majority of those who experience sexual violence and exploitation within this arena.

The chapter locates young women's experiences of sexual violence and exploitation within the wider context of their exposure to other forms of violence and victimisation within the gang environment and the ways in which their status can potentially expose them to, or shield them from, such harm. Their experiences of violence and victimisation are considered both in terms of the initial experience of harm and, particularly in the case of sexual harm, the accompanying blame-based rhetoric of having brought these experiences upon themselves. Critical to this dualist discourse of 'harm and blame' are the concepts of sexual agency and consent, as explored in sections 2.6 and 2.7.

The decision to include these contextual considerations prior to the exploration of incidents of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation is a purposeful one, driven by a recognition that young people's experiences of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation cannot be divorced from the pervading motifs of patriarchy, violence and exploitation that typify many gang environments. Neither, however, can they be divorced from experiences of sexual violence or exploitation within the wider adolescent population (as outlined in sections 1.4 and 2.8). It is therefore critical that the findings of this research are also considered in light of how they reflect these wider social norms.

## 2.2 The nature of gangs

The gangs that participants identified across the six research sites were almost exclusively located within areas of acute social deprivation. They were primarily postcode or area-based, delineated by geographical boundaries. As such, they were largely populated by young people growing up within those areas, although young people in some of the research sites identified a growing trend of 'out of area' young people becoming involved in, or associated with, gangs.

Participants identified a number of different gangs in their local areas, noting variation in terms of their size, origins, *raison d'être*, status and influence within the community. Some also spoke of a fragmentation of gangs in their area in recent years and a proliferation of new younger gangs. In some areas, respondents also made reference to the emergence of a wider 'wannabee' gang culture, in which other young people were seeking to emulate the behaviours and attitudes of gang-involved youth.

When considering the composition of gangs, participants talked primarily about young men, with nine out of ten participants identifying male only or male dominated gangs. Young women were more frequently referred to in terms of association with, rather than involvement in, gangs, with only one in ten participants identifying mixed gender or female only gangs. Interestingly half of

all female participants self-identified as either currently or previously 'gang involved' rather than 'gang associated', indicating a potential disconnect between how they understood their status and position, and how it was viewed by others (see section 2.4).

## 2.3 Involvement in gangs

Asked why young people become involved, or associated, with gangs, participants identified both individual and structural factors to be at play. In terms of structural issues, lack of opportunity and an absence of valid alternatives emerged as significant themes, with a number of young people being very vocal about lack of prospects and the impact of recent cuts on services for young people in their communities.

Status, power and respect were some of the most commonly cited concepts in young people's dialogue about motivators for gang involvement and association. The ways in which this status and respect was 'earned' was understood to vary between young men and young women, mirroring typical gender stereotypes about power, autonomy and masculinity. For young men, it was about 'being known on road', 'getting a name' and 'getting respect' through their actions as an individual and their membership of the gang. For young women, it was more about status by association (with a young man in a gang) rather than achieving status or respect in their own right – you gain respect and status by being someone's 'girl' (see section 2.4 below).

Protection also featured strongly in young people's commentary about motivators for gang involvement and association. Both male and female participants spoke of young men joining gangs as a means of protecting themselves within their communities. They spoke also of young women consequently aligning themselves with these young men as a means of accessing such protection. Ironically, for some young women, this association could lead to greater exposure to physical or sexual violence when the relationship ended, and/or from others as a result of their association with the gang-involved young man (see Chapter Three).

There was a sense amongst many participants that there was almost a degree of inevitability about young people (particularly young men) who grow up in certain areas becoming involved in gangs, given the lack of alternative viable options and the normalisation of gang-involvement amongst their social network. This is not to negate the power of individual agency within this, but to recognise the powerful external influences impacting upon this and the particularly constrained nature of the circumstances within which this is being exercised.

One in three participants identified friends, siblings, and even parents who were gang-involved or associated and (wittingly or unwittingly) modelling this as a valid, desirable and/or expected lifestyle choice for them. A desire to recreate a sense of 'family' and find a sense of belonging where this was absent from a young person's life was also identified as a reason why young people became, and stayed, involved in the gang environment. A number of participants particularly cited absent fathers as a reason why they thought young men would be drawn to gang membership, and why young women were in turn drawn to them.

## 2.4 Comparative status of young men and young women within gangs

Though using variable language to describe this, most participants' contributions (both male and female) indicated that the gangs they had experienced were inherently patriarchal environments, in which the status and experiences of individuals were clearly shaped by their gender and consequent assigned social status. Again, this is not to deny the creative ways in which young people exercise agency and negotiate their experiences within this ('gangster girls' adopting a masculine presentation for example; see section 3.6.1), but to recognise that the exercise of such agency is more challenging, particularly for young women, within such strongly embedded hierarchical and patriarchal environments.

Recognising that the gang environment was differentially experienced by young men and young women, participants expressed a clear consensus that most young women's experiences were primarily mediated through those of the young men with whom they were connected. To expand, participants' narratives about the roles that young men could attain within the gang environment related primarily to their personal status within the gang (younger, elder etc), with reference only to their comparative status to other young men and no reference to their sexuality or relationship with young women. In stark contrast, accounts of the roles that young women could attain and their consequent experiences had, in most cases, little to do with their independent status and all to do with their relationships (familial or sexual) with young men and/or their (real or perceived) sexual availability. The one notable exception to this was the experience of 'gangster girls', as explored in section 3.6.1.

Whilst recognising that each gang environment is unique, participants' contributions clearly indicated that a young person's relative positioning within the gang environment could have a direct bearing upon his or her risk and experience of sexual violence or exploitation. Whilst young men were not immune from this (one in ten felt that a young man's risk of sexual victimisation could vary according to his role, with those with less status within the gang at greater risk; see section 3.7), it did appear to be particularly the case for young women. Eight out of ten participants identified a direct relationship between a young woman's status/role within the gang environment and her risk of sexual violence and exploitation (see section 3.6).

Underpinning this identified relationship between role and risk was an overriding consensus that young women, as a whole, were less highly esteemed within the gang environment than males. Most participants asserted, or inadvertently indicated, that young women were frequently objectified, used and/or controlled within the gang environment, although many did note that this was by no means unique to that setting. This objectification of, and lack of respect towards, young women was reflected both in their experiences and in the ways in which they were represented in young men's discourse about them:



*"Within gangs they don't treat women as women. They're just objects... You've got to understand like girls, to males in gangs, are commodities. They're just like going and picking a pair of shoes off the shelf and putting them on... the girls are not that special to them, but they have to have 'em around. They're easy come, they're easy go. As quick as they found her, if they went, they'd find someone else"* (Participant C, 23 year old young woman)

*"Because of the life they [gang-involved young men] lead they've gotta prove certain points and those points are money over bitches"* (Participant A, 19 year old young man)

*"Competition as to who can beat [have sex with] that ting first"* (Participant M, 15 year old young man)

Young women who associated with gangs (particularly those characterised as 'links'; see section 3.6.5) were frequently described by participants in very derogatory and depersonalised terms; 'bitch', 'ting', 'junge', 'sket', 'ho', 'skank' and so forth. They were also generally portrayed as there to serve the needs and wishes of gang-involved males and readily replaceable once they had served their purpose:

*"But boys in gangs don't treat girls in gangs the same... They just treat 'em like anything innit. Cos they know really from your status, being in your gang, you can treat that girl however you want because if she runs away there's always gonna be a next girl that will come to you"* (Participant B, 16 year old young man)

*"They just get passed around the guys, that is mainly their role, yeah... and then from once they've been around the circle or like the gang or whatever, then they're no longer of use and you probably won't see them girls again, coz obviously their use has been, all that they've got to offer has been given... Yeah then they'll just, they'll see the next girl or whatever, or the next group of girls and the same thing will happen over and over and over again"* (Participant Q, 16 year old young man)

This is not, however, how these young women appeared to view themselves and a clear disconnect was observable between how many young women conceptualised their role and status within the gang environment, and how this was viewed by others:

*"That's the exploitation part because a lot of girls think if I sleep with all these guys they'll like me but in actual fact you're putting yourself further away from what you want by doing that. Guys want a girl who's proper... with gang members they have a lot of girls. They have like you could say, like the main one, your main girlfriend who you go for meals with, stuff like that, and then you'll have a lot of other girlfriends that you'll do other little things with. They would have her selling weed for them or holding stuff for them; sleeping with them and stuff but they won't be as intimate as they are with like the main girlfriend... The girl won't even know about all the other girls, or who's number one, you know. She'll think that she's number one"* (Participant E, 24 year old young man)

A similar disconnect was apparent in terms of the degree of protection young women thought their association with gang-involved males would bring them and the reality of this:

*"I've been in the situation before where a girl, like cos she's done it [sex] for me she thinks that I'm protecting her now, so like this thing when someone's come after her and she's phoning my phone thinking that I'm going to protect her, and I'm thinking like you're only that to me. You weren't nothing to me, and like don't think you're protected because you wanted to do, I never told you"* (Participant Q, 16 year old young man)

*"Like if a girl was to get beat up in town by another gang member you can't really phone the boys and say 'Such and such has just happened, come in town and back me' but if that was a boy they'd all be there, do you know what I mean? Unless it's your boyfriend and he's willing to protect you or that's your cousin or family member it's like 'you shouldn't have been caught in town' but if it's a boy then they're all going there, the girls are even going"* (Participant Z3, 18 year old young woman)

As indicated throughout the range of examples above, the reality of young women's engagement in the gang environment was that they frequently experienced the risks and harm without the associated protections and solidarity generally afforded to males.<sup>10</sup> Some of the key forms of risk and harm they experienced within this environment are explored in section 2.5 below.

## 2.5 Harm experienced by young women in the gang environment

Given the context outlined above, it is not surprising to learn that young women were identified as experiencing many different forms of harm within the gang environment. Their experiences of sexual violence and exploitation, the primary focus of this work, are explored in Chapter Three, but this section briefly considers the wider continuum of violence and harm within which these experiences occur. Three particular forms of harm are considered here (as those most frequently identified by participants):

- Domestic violence;
- Non-relational physical violence; and
- Exposure to other illegal activity.

These are, however, by no means the only ways in which young women experience harm within the gang environment as clearly illustrated by the range of examples presented throughout this report.

This wider context of exposure to violence and illegality inevitably influences young women's interactions with, and experiences of, the gang environment; as indeed it does for young men. In particular, it contributes to:

<sup>10</sup> These protections and solidarity afforded to males were also not without their restrictions but that is beyond the scope of this report

- A familiarity with, and potential de-sensitisation to, violence and control;
- The enforcement of a male-dominated hierarchy;
- Control of young women's behaviours and experiences within this;
- The expectation that individual agency is secondary to the needs/norms of the group;
- Vulnerability to threats and blackmail; and
- An awareness of the implications of transgressing expectations and the very real potential of significant harm as a result of this.

As such, they provide critical context to understanding the wider dynamics at play in relation to the experiences of sexual violence and exploitation outlined in Chapter Three.

### 2.5.1 Domestic Violence

Violence within intimate personal relationships was identified as a very serious issue within gangs, with nine out of ten of the interviewees who discussed negative aspects of sex and relationships within gangs (n=96) identifying examples of domestic violence, particularly that of a physical nature, within relationships.

Although a number were at pains to (correctly) highlight that this issue was by no means unique to gangs many did believe its manifestation to be more serious within that environment given the normative levels of violence within that setting and the potential transference of a conflict mentality into personal relationships:

*"A lot of gang members do beat up their girlfriends a lot...My friend, one of them went in prison for it, I actually went around to his house and stopped him... gone to her house, beat her up, took bites out of her back, like big bites out of her back, I mean literally smashed her face with a frying pan... And like even, there's just so much domestic. I think it's cos the lifestyle that gang members live in, what they're used to is violence, that's all they know is violence basically, yeah. Your life becomes one big violent thing so as soon as you get hot headed all you do is some violence, so soon as they get into a bit of argument with their girlfriend or whatever it's just straight to violence, they don't think about what they're doing"* (Participant N, 24 year old young man)

*"If a girl was to cheat, if a girl cheated on a man, say if the man was one of my people anyway, I'd expect him to punch her. I'd expect it because you know what, yeah, all that anger at one time, the only way most of my bredgerins know how to get rid of it is to be violent, innit? So you be violent and it's your girl's fault, so you're violent to your girl and then you'll be violent to the man that she done it with as well"* (Participant L, 18 year old young man)

*"Take me for instance. I liked her [daughter's] dad because he was this bad boy. That attracted me when I was younger for some reason, to have someone stronger. I felt safe with him... But, that all came back in my face years after because he put his hand on me,*

*and that's when things got rocky... At home, when the doors were closed, when there were no visitors around, anyone to see, he was a monster, yeah he turned into a monster over the years. Threatened me with a sword. He beat me up when I got pregnant with [child], tried to force me to have an abortion, so I ended the relationship.... It's normal, like... say if I told someone I had to call the police on my baby-father because he pulled a knife out, this is true, it happened, they would go, 'oh' – not at the fact that he pulled a knife out on me, but because I called the police. That's how normal it is."* (Participant H, 24 year old young woman)

### 2.5.2 Non-relational physical violence

Although most discourse about physical violence in gangs has traditionally been focused on the experiences of young men, this study found that young women were also exposed to considerable levels of physical violence within the gang environment. This could be as unintended targets caught up in intra-male violence or, as was more frequently noted to be the case, as a means controlling their behaviour and/or as punishment for having transgressed gang expectations:

*"I've seen girls get shot...they get caught in the crossfire. I seen a girl get shot with a baby in her arms. These kids came down and bam shot her, she was with some of my old crew and bam they came down and shot her"* (Participant F, 23 year old young man)

*"I walked in a party one time, honest to God I walked in a party and I looked around and I didn't even know what was going on. There was like a big room, it was full and there was loads of gang members, guys, and they was all just like swarmed into the middle and I didn't even know what was going on until I like, I fought my way through like that and seen every single one of them are beating this one girl up on the floor... There must have been about more than 17 guys, they're fighting each other to get to this girl...That's because she got seen and there was rumours going around that she was going out with someone from the opposite side"* (Participant N, 24 year old young man)

*"They always get treated crap, sometimes there's abuse – physical abuse, also psychological abuse, you know making a girl feel like she's worth nothing, do you know what I mean? A lot of manipulation, reverse psychology, that kind of stuff.. It's like a woman is just an object and that is all she is, a trophy, nothing more, nothing less. Has no feelings, you don't need to respect her, you don't need to treat her right"* (Participant K3, 21 year old young woman)

The research also identified an emerging pattern of intra-female physical violence across a number of the research sites, often at the behest of gang-involved males:

*"It's like when something happens with one of the guys...oh this girl cheated on me... can you sort this girl out. It's like sometimes they'd come up to us... 'Here's 20 quid, go and beat up that girl'... That's how easy they thought it was... the most I've ever been handed is £80, and I think that was to beat up three girls"* (Participant G, 14 year old young woman)

*"If girls come over here from another area, like the girls are expected to do something to the girls. I've seen it where girls who were in gangs have been in the park and we've walked through the park and all the girls were like 'Why have you let them walk through here?'...If she got that phone call saying there's a girl on the estate she would have to go. If she didn't go then it's like you're a shit bag, you don't back us, you don't rep us. You're not down with us... So the guys treat them like they should be doing the same stuff as them but the respect levels is totally different"* (Participant Z3, 18 year old young woman)

As illustrated in the examples above, the forms of intra-female physical violence identified within the research included fighting between girls from rival gang areas, and enacting revenge on behalf of a gang-involved male who did not agree with men hitting women (yet interestingly, and importantly, saw no issue with asking a female to do it on his behalf).

### 2.5.3 Exposure to other forms of illegal activity

Young women were also observed to become involved in other forms of illegal activity as a result of their associations with gangs or gang-involved young men. These most frequently related to holding drugs or weapons on their person or at their properties. Participants' views as to whether young women were willingly engaging in such illegal activity – or doing so under duress and/or false assumptions about the benefits this would bring – were observed to vary (as indeed was the case with young men's involvement in such activities), but the majority view was that it was frequently initiated by young men:

*"I got passed a knife and weed as well cos I couldn't get searched. And they couldn't search me cos I was 13 when it happened, they would need my mum with me to take me down to the police station to strip-search me and they would need a female police officer so I got away with it"* (Participant C2, 17 year old young woman)

*"I've got a lot of friends that are boys and seeing how they treat girls and that, that just gives me an eye opener... I see girls and that, like they probably think that that's their boyfriend but basically he's just using them – he needs to go somewhere, he needs to put his drugs or whatever, his weapon. I got a friend that's been to prison for holding a gun in her mum's house. She wasn't in a gang, she was a proper quality girl but of course she was seeing one of them and she got caught up with all that – 'oh just hold this in your house' – and someone told the police so she went to prison. Now she's come out with a criminal record, her life's just changed. She has to start from scratch, man. When you've got a criminal record it's hard to get a job really, innit?"* (Participant I, 21 year old young woman)

## 2.6 Blame attributed to young women

One of the particularly strong themes that emerged from the research was that of a double victimisation

in which young women were not only harmed, but also apportioned blame for this harm. A number of participants offered commentary along the following themes: she knew what she was getting into; boys have to act that way because girls are untrustworthy and cause trouble; or her actions and attitudes brought it upon herself. Perhaps most pertinent, given the focus of the research, were the double-standards applied to young men's and women's sexual behaviour and the associated motif that a young woman's sexual presentation and/or (perceived) sexual reputation was justification for sexual violence and abuse.

### 2.6.1 Gradients of consent

Playing into the stereotypical double-standards around male and female sexuality – that are certainly not unique to gangs (see Coy *et al* 2013) – many participants judged young women for their willingness to engage in casual sex, whilst simultaneously commending young men for the same patterns of behaviour:

*"Boys get rated and girls get slated. So basically could be the same age, girls and boys, they have sex, if anyone finds out, the boy will get 'oooh, good boy, good boy' but the girl will be like 'oi, you're a sket, you're this, you're that'"* (Participant S, 14 year old young woman)

*"Some boys will just go around doing anything that walks. Then after they've done what they've had to do that's it, you're a slag, you're a slag... I even said to a boy, when you go out and sleep with someone, what are you doing – 'enjoying myself' – 'So why can't a girl just go out and enjoy themselves?' That's her business, she's just enjoying herself, having fun, but she gets known as a slag. And then once that girl is known as a slag, as soon as that girl goes to see another friend that's not a slag, as soon as she's seen with them she's a slag, just because she's hanging around with them"* (Participant I2, 18 year old young woman)

Categorising young women on the basis of their perceived sexual presentation and behaviour, participants created a clear dichotomy between 'good girls' or 'proper girls' who they felt should be treated with some degree of respect and 'skets' or 'ho's' who they believed had forfeited their right to dignity, respect and sexual self-determination as a consequence of their failure to police their sexual presentation and activity:

*"It depends what the girl is. If she's a slag, she ain't equal. Boys just treat her like shit and that's the only thing. Don't get your name around if you're not ready to get violated"* (Participant F2, 15 year old young man)

*"When it comes to things like sexual gang-rape and related things, my opinion some of them are not asking for it and some of them are asking for it. You get these girls that go out to the clubs, they wear these short dresses, they don't wear tights or leggings or anything with it, they're really low cut, to some people that would be begging to say 'Come and get me, I'm open for it'"* (Participant J2, 19 year old young man)



*"They wouldn't just pick on someone who's not like that, they would go for someone who has a reputation and they think you're easy, we'll do whatever we want to you" (Participant Z, 22 year old young woman)*

An alarming consequence of this conceptualisation is an expressed belief amongst many young men (and indeed some young women) that not all young women have equal (or in some cases any) rights to assent to, or decline, sexual interaction:

*"Depends what kind of name she has. If she has a name and someone tries to sleep with her and she won't let them, and they know that she's slept with loads of other people, they'll force her into it. They would rape her, if you class that as rape, yeah... You've got girls like, one girl, I won't say her name but if you go to [area] and say her name everyone will know her. She's slept with everyone. Everyone. But it's got to a point that cos she's slept with so many people, when people see her it's more forced onto her. 'Just touch it, man, just do that, just do this' and then she'll have to do it cos she'll be scared... Cos everytime I spoke to her on the phone she was always getting hit, beaten up for something... Let's say we was young, we was 16, we saw her and there's 30 of us on the bus, we'd just run off and take her to the forest and then make her do everything to everyone, cos we know that she's like that. So she can't tell us that she ain't gonna do it. So they'll be like 'you can't tell me you're not gonna do it after you, ra, ta, ta. So just do that man before I slap you up' That's when that mentality comes in. You're thinking 'you're like that anyway, so you might as well do it'" (Participant M2, 21 year old young man)*

*"Obviously if you know a girl's a sket and then you ask her to suck your dick and then she says no you're thinking 'Well I know you suck dick. You sucked my friend's yesterday'... obviously you know it's not like you grabbing their head and putting it anywhere, it's just obviously if you can say verbally forcing someone without shouting or anything, persuasion. So it's just persuasion, you can just work your way round, persuasion. [R:<sup>11</sup> So are people likely to do that with other girls who don't have reputations?] No, you treat a girl the way you think she deserves to be treated. If a girl's high maintenance you treat them high maintenance. If a girl's a skank you treat them like a skank... If a girl's walking around and you can see her arse crack every day and her tits are hanging out, yeah, then you're gonna treat them the way they deserve to be treated" (Participant L, 18 year old young man)*

*"If she looks like she's a bit of a ho then the boys will treat her like a ho... and she has no choice but to accept how they're treating her, because she's made herself look like that if you know what I mean" (Participant G2, 17 year old young woman)*

As illustrated throughout the range of opinions included above, many young men indicated a clear difference in how they would treat a young woman who they

perceived to be sexually permissive, compared to those whom they viewed as 'proper' girls. Whilst consent emerged as a problematic concept generally within the research (see section 2.7 below), it was particularly so with reference to this group of young women.

## 2.6.2 'Deserving' and 'undeserving' victims

Not only were these young women more likely to experience sexual violence as a result of denying their right to grant or withhold consent, they were also more likely to be denied sympathy or support afterwards, being viewed as having somehow brought these experiences upon themselves. Participants' commentary on these issues clearly played into the traditional discourse of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims that can also be observed amongst other groups of young people (see Coy et al 2013), with sexually active and independent young women firmly located within the latter 'undeserving' category. Interestingly, this discourse of deserving and undeserving victims, and the associated apportioning of blame, was observable amongst both male and female participants:

*"My cousin, she was pretty young and she was with this guy who was in a gang and one day he said to her to meet her at a park... he raped her but then like a couple of his friends done it too... So I dunno, it's not right but what can you do? Shouldn't have really gone to the park in the night. I know it's bad thing to say but common sense will tell you not to go to the park in the night you know... someone can only do to you what they think they can get away with. That's my motto really. If you put yourself in a scenario like that and put yourself at risk then that is gonna happen. It's personal choice at the end of the day; it's personal choice. She chose to go to the park, d'ye know what I mean, she chose" (Participant D3, 20 year old young woman)*

*"I've heard a girl saying 'Oh, this person raped me blah, blah' but it's more the girls what have come out of the area and they're coming round here and they're flirting with the guys and they're giving them that idea... and then now when they're calling her a slag they're saying 'Oh, I didn't wanna do it.' A lot of them probably didn't wanna do it but I don't think you said no... obviously you got pressured into doing it, kind of thing, but you put that idea out there, do you know what I mean?" (Participant Z3, 18 year old young woman)*

Many of the young women who participated in the research were at pains to distance themselves from the young women they described in this manner. This may, in part, be a necessary protective, distancing mechanism, particularly in light of the fact that young women could experience increased risk because of such friendships:

*"You came with this girl, so I know you're just like her. That's what mandem will think" (Participant M2, 21 year old young man)*

*"When they go back to school no-one really wants to talk to you cos you're known as a ho, and no-one really*

11 'R' represents a question or statement made by the researcher.



*wants to associate themselves with a ho because then people think if she's hanging out with a ho she must be one as well"* (Participant T3, 15 year old young woman)

*be with him or she likes him but the boy don't really wanna be with her, he just wants sex"* (Participant O, 16 year old young man)

*"Cases of pressure in which like a girl will be in a situation where she's probably with multiple males and they're all up for it, but she's not sure how to get herself out of the situation... Come on, you know you want it. No we're not going to tell nobody, things like that, and they'll just absorb those words and alright then, and they end up having sex... They're ultimately aware that they're putting pressure on, but like I said, that's their aim, like when I said about boys, they want to have sex with as many people as they can...they do understand that it's unfair, but if it goes ahead, then it's by her choice because they're not physically forcing her. It's more of a mental attack... If she wanted to say 'no' and she put up a stink and 'if you touch me I'm going to call the police'; if that was the road that she'd gone down, she wouldn't have ended up in the situation, so it's obviously by her own consent that she ends up having sex with these people... If she actually says 'no, I don't want to do this', then it won't go ahead, but if in her head she's thinking I don't want to do this, I don't want to do this but she ends up doing it, then by all means she's given her consent"* (Participant U2, 20 year old young man)

*"Sometimes you can know the person and like the girl could say no or whatever and they still go ahead, or like there's been girls who've been under the influence of like weed or alcohol and they don't really have enough willpower. Yeah, like they might be saying no but they don't have the power to push them off and I think sometimes a lot of guys don't realise in their minds that it is actually rape. Yeah, lots of girls have been saying that and it's funny because we talked earlier about sometimes the boys can be persuasive and... I don't think a lot of the time they think they're doing something wrong... I think when you say no and mean yes it's like you're not actually stopping them or like trying to stop them, but I think if you say no and you try to stop them it actually really means no"* (Participant A3, 19 year old young woman)

This belief that a young woman's sexual behaviour or history, or indeed her mere association with another young woman, can invalidate her right to say no to sexual activity has serious implications for the acceptability and consequent prevalence of sexual violence within these environments, as explored in Chapter Three. It also has serious implications for the likelihood of young women disclosing and seeking support, as subsequently explored in Chapter Four.

## 2.7 Consent

The issue of perceived gradients of consent – dependent on a young woman's sexual reputation, presentation and/or associations – as outlined above is just one manifestation of a wider issue that arose in the research, regarding lack of understanding of sexual consent and how this could and should be obtained.

Understanding of the concepts of coercion and consent, and how these might impact upon the legality or illegality of sexual activities, were very limited amongst many research participants. As illustrated in the range of examples cited below, and at various points throughout Chapter Three, consent to sexual activity was generally assumed unless there were clear indications to the contrary, rather than actively sought and granted.

Consent was primarily understood in terms of a straightforward yes or no with little or no recognition of the impact of contextual factors such as coercion or fear on a young person's ability to grant or withhold consent. Although the presence of 'persuasion' was frequently referenced, it was rarely understood to be problematic despite the fact that it is clearly at odds with the statutory definition of consent, defined as 'agreeing by choice and having the freedom and capacity to make that choice' (Sexual Offences Act 2003):

*"He will tell her to come meet him while he's with all his friends...then she would come and then realise that the whole gang's there and most of them will probably end up having sex with her as well, if it's not his actual girl... the boy that tells the girl to come will try and convince her to have sex with all his other friends as well. He would go first and then he will just convince her after he's finished to have sex with like second, the third, the fourth boy, the fifth and it goes on and on [R: and when you say convince?] They're not really on it 100% but they will try persuade her so it's like not really classed as rape if that makes sense, like they're not raping her because she is allowing it. I've never known any of my friends to rape a girl but I've known of gang members that have like had sex with a girl one after other, another and so on but they persuade the girl first to make sure. She's not coming to meet them to have sex with like 10 boys but she'll probably end up doing that cos she's persuaded and cos she likes the first boy that she was with. She will probably do it for his sake because she wants to*

As illustrated in the final quotation above, a lack of understanding about consent was not in any way limited to young men. Young women also indicated clear misconceptions about what consent was and the conditions under which this could be granted. Whilst this lack of understanding on the part of both young men and young women is by no means unique to the gang environment (see Coy et al 2013) its presentation within the gang environment does present particular challenges. Occurring in a context of heightened objectification and disempowerment of young women – and a sense of entitlement on the part of young men – it resulted in a particularly high-risk environment for young women, in which their sexual experiences were primarily determined and shaped by the agendas of others. The practical repercussions of this are considered in greater depth in Chapter Three, alongside an explanation of how young men can also experience sexual violence when similarly denied the ability to freely assent to, or decline, sexual activity.

## 2.8 Young people, sexual violence and exploitation

As highlighted at the outset of this chapter, young people's experiences of sexual violence and exploitation within the gang environment cannot be viewed in isolation from young people's wider experiences of sexual violence and exploitation, and indeed those in wider society. To do so would both inappropriately demonise young people within gang environments and detract attention away from the very real risk experienced by other young people outside of these environments (see, for example, *Barter et al 2009* or *Beckett and Schubotz 2013*).

Although this study was specifically commissioned to look at gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation – and as such was not a comparative study of these experiences and the experiences of other non-gang peer groups – participants were asked to share their views on how the attitudes and experiences they observed within gangs compared to those they observed in other environments.

Although the general consensus amongst participants was that sexual violence and exploitation within gangs was uniquely influenced by the environment in which it occurred (see section 3.5), many were also keen to highlight the influence of wider societal culture upon this and similar examples of sexual violence or exploitation in other settings and to inextricably link sexual victimisation within gangs to these wider manifestations of the same:

*"It's just like society, innit? Like women don't get that much respect in society like a guy. A man can have a job and a woman can have the same job but a man can get paid more, do you know what I mean? It's just always that guys always have the upper power. It's just how society is, men naturally get more respect... men are just dominating it. I was having this debate yesterday. It's a man's world. It's getting better but just in society that is how it is. Cos like a lot of people from other areas, like more classier areas than round here say, 'Oh, the girls don't have no respect for themselves' blah, blah, but that's just how girls get treated. That's how girls get treated in the workplace. That's how girls get treated on the streets."*  
(Participant Z3, 18 year old young woman)

*"I think there's such a big thing about gangs, gangs, if you get involved with someone in a gang this is going to happen, this is going to happen, and I think yes, you are more at risk, but I think the problem's much wider, yeah... I know of friends who've been on nights out or whatever, and they've gone back to after parties to apartments, they've been really drunk, and they'll go back and they'll have sex with four or five guys in this apartment, and that's nothing gang related. That's just they've had a few drinks, they're out on a night out"*  
(Participant T, 21 year old young woman)

## 2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has considered some of the key contextual factors that impact upon young people's experiences of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation. It has highlighted a number of critical themes that the reader should bear in mind when reading about these experiences and when considering what appropriate responses to these might be. These include:

- The need to consider young people's experiences of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation with reference to the wider social context of the gang and wider societal structures of inequality and gendered violence;
- Differential exposure to risk of sexual violence for individuals depending on both their gender and relative status within the gang environment;
- The relationship between young people's understanding of consent and potential prevalence of sexual violence;
- The relationship between how young women are characterised or perceived in terms of their sexual availability and the risk of sexual violence they face; and
- The fact that victims are often both harmed and blamed and the potential re-victimisation associated with this.

Having identified these important contextual constraints, the report now proceeds with an exploration of the forms of sexual violence and exploitation identified within the gang environment and the young people most likely to be impacted by these.

# Chapter 3: Young people and gang-associated sexual violence

## Key messages

1. There are many different forms of sexual violence and exploitation occurring within the gang environment. Some of these are particular to gangs – sexual assaults of young women associated with other gangs or setting up young men in rival gangs, for example. Others reflect wider patterns of peer-on-peer sexual violence and exploitation – individual or multiple perpetrator rape or the distribution of sexual images, for example – but are uniquely experienced within a context of heightened risk and retribution resulting from the hyper-masculine, violence-permeated gang environment.
2. It is difficult to estimate prevalence of these incidents – they are not being reported, they are not being looked for and they are not being consistently recorded – but what we do know from the research is that young people are rarely reporting their experiences of sexual victimisation within the gang environment.
3. Most incidents of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are perpetrated by young men, against young women. Young men can also be victims but information about this was less forthcoming and young people's reactions to this were very different.
4. Most incidents take place between young people who are known to each other within the gang environment, rather than affecting strangers within the wider community.
5. Young women's exposure to risk of sexual violence and exploitation appears to vary according to their status and role. This relates to both risk within the gang with which they associate, and risk from rival gangs as a result of this association.
6. There is a clear disconnect between 'theoretical commentary' on the permissiveness of rape and other sexual assaults, and the reality of what is being experienced on the ground. This may, in part, be the result of some young people's misunderstanding about what constitutes rape (thinking it to be an act perpetrated by a violent stranger) and a failure to recognise the possibility of rape within relational settings.

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the findings of the research in relation to both the various forms of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation that were identified in

the research and the young people most likely to be affected by these. The chapter commences with a brief discussion about prevalence data and the difficulties inherent in collating this. It proceeds with an exploration of the various forms of sexual violence or exploitation identified as impacting upon young women within the gang environment. Recognising that different young women experience different levels of risk, this is followed by an examination of the different roles that young women can hold within the gang environment and the relative risk associated with each of these. Whilst acknowledging that the vast majority of victims of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are female, the research shows that young men can also be victimised in this manner and the chapter concludes with a brief exploration of their experiences.

## 3.2 Prevalence of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation

One of the original aims of the research was to collect existing prevalence data on cases of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation across the six research sites. A detailed data information request was sent to all research sites in an attempt to collate relevant existing data. Unfortunately, whilst many sites were able to provide information on gang-associated offending and sexual offending as distinct categories, they did not hold existing data sets that cross-referenced sexual offending with gang-association.

Whilst this discovery has negative implications for the research, in terms of our ability to locate interviewees' contributions within wider patterns of prevalence across the research sites, it is in many ways unsurprising given the findings of the wider OCC Inquiry in terms of the number of areas collecting prevalence data on those at risk of, or experiencing, gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation (see section 4.3.1). On a more positive note, the process of requesting the data has alerted the research sites to the need to address this current shortcoming and work has already commenced on this in some of the sites.

### 3.2.1 Prevalence within the research sample

In light of this absence of wider prevalence data, the only limited commentary that can be offered on prevalence is that relating to the research sample. Although the qualitative nature of the study, and the interview approach adopted, were not designed to provide a quantitative count of the prevalence of sexual violence or exploitation within this sample, the completion of a quantitative coding frame on the core 131 interviews<sup>12</sup> does enable some comment on the comparative frequency with which different issues were identified by this set of interviewees.

12 Those interviews where participants indicated some form of direct connection with gangs and/or gang-involved individuals.



Not surprisingly, not all of the interviewees were willing to engage in a detailed discussion about the violent or exploitative sexual activities that took place in gangs. Nor did all of the respondents feel that such issues were relevant to their experience of gangs, with some (particularly young men) conceptualising their gang experience as centred around money and physical violence, as opposed to personal relationships and sex. Thus, the commentary that follows is based on the 96 interviewees (87% of females and 81% of males) who both (a) indicated a direct connection with a gang and/or gang-involved individual and (b) discussed incidents of sexual violence or exploitation within their interviews (although as noted below, not all explicitly conceptualised these as such). All subsequent percentages cited within this chapter are proportions of this sub-sample (n=96)<sup>13</sup> rather than the full research sample, unless explicitly noted otherwise.

Despite the fact that interviewees were encouraged to speak about their knowledge and experiences in the third person, many of these 96 participants did still identify personal experience and/or direct exposure to sexual violence or exploitation within the gang environment. Of these:

- 40% said they had directly witnessed incidents of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation; and
- 23% of females and 4% of males identified themselves as victims of sexual violence or exploitation within or by gangs.

### 3.3 Overview of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation against young women

Examples of sexual violence towards, and/or sexual exploitation of, young women were shared by virtually all of the 96 participants who discussed incidents of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation within their interviews. As noted previously, however, not all explicitly conceptualised them as such. Clear gender differences were apparent within this with four out of five females recognising the exploitative and/or violent nature of the sexual interaction being described, compared to just over half of the males. The remainder discussed these incidents as part and parcel of sexual activity within the gang environment, without any obvious recognition that they constituted a form of sexual violence or exploitation (see section 3.5.2).

The vast majority of incidents of sexual violence towards, or sexual exploitation of, females were noted to be perpetrated by young men although, as indicated by the previous statement, the degree to which they recognised the violent/exploitative nature of these incidents varied across participants (see also, section 3.5.2).

Although fear of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation did extend into the wider community, the general consensus amongst participants in this study

was that only those who were associated with gangs in some way were at significant risk of experiencing this. This association could, however, take many forms including both those who made a conscious decision to associate with gang-involved individuals (girlfriends or ‘links’, for example) and those for whom association was an unavoidable feature of their existing networks (due to a familial relationship with a gang-involved male, for example). The variable levels of risk experienced by young women with different associations with gang-involved individuals are explored in section 3.6 below.

Participants identified a range of different forms of sexual exploitation or sexual violence against young women within the gang environment, with four out of five identifying several different forms. Table 3.1 provides an overview of these, presented in order of the frequency with which they were identified by participants.

**Table 3.1: Forms of sexual violence or exploitation against young women identified by interviewees**

<i>Form of sexual violence or exploitation</i>	<i>Proportion of sample identifying that form</i>
Pressure to engage in sexual activity	65%
Distribution of sexual images	50%
Sex in exchange for (perceived) status or protection	50%
Individual perpetrator rape	41%
Sex in exchange for other tangible goods	39%
Multiple perpetrator rape	34%
Young women being used to set up males in rival gangs	31%
Males targeting young women for sexual relationships or sexually assaulting young women as a means of getting at a rival gang	30%
Sexual activity with multiple males	29%
Other sexual assault	23%
Sex in exchange for money	23%
Sexual assault with a weapon	11%
Sex as a means of initiation into the gang	7%

As can be seen from Table 3.1 above, some of the incidents identified by participants clearly constitute sexual exploitation (as defined in the 2009 DCSF Guidance) whilst others fall within the wider, but no less serious, definition of sexual violence. Some are clearly unique to the gang environment. Others reflect wider patterns of sexual violence or exploitation experienced by young people and by wider society; though potentially uniquely expressed within the gang environment (see section 3.5 below).

<sup>13</sup> Given the interviewing approach adopted, it is likely that higher proportions of young people had direct connections with a gang and knowledge of sexual violence or exploitation within it, but chose not to disclose this within the research.

### 3.4 Gang-specific incidents of sexual violence or exploitation against young women

The three particular forms of sexual violence or exploitation affecting young women that were identified as unique to the gang environment were:

- Sexually assaulting, or having a sexual relationship with, a young woman associated with a rival gang or gang-involved young man in order to 'disrespect' or provoke that young man or gang (section 3.4.1);
- Getting young women to use their sexuality to 'set up' males in rival gangs (section 3.4.2); and
- Sexual activity or sexual assault as a means of initiation into the gang (section 3.4.3).

Two of these were exclusively associated with inter-gang rivalry, whilst the third could involve victims and perpetrators from either the same, or rival, gangs.

#### 3.4.1. Sexual relationships/sexual assaults of young women motivated by inter-gang rivalry

Just under one-third of the participants who identified cases of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation against young women, shared examples of young women who were associated with a gang and/or a gang-involved male being explicitly sexually targeted because of this relationship. There were two main ways in which this was observed to occur:

- Starting a sexual relationship with a young woman (usually a familial relative of a rival gang-involved young man) in order to 'disrespect' that young man:

*"Like, sometimes you have, trouble with the geezer, but at the same time, like, he's got a sister or something like that, or, and then, kind of, like, you're kind of like fucking his sister just to violate him, just to take the piss out of him, really. Obviously, that's going to make the geezer more angry, knowing that you're actually fucking his sister... Like, they can kidnap a person's sister and threaten her and probably beat her up and that, and then make her sleep with you and that, or rape her, or they can get her family, like, one of the family members and then hold them for ransom or something like that"* (Participant P, 17 year old young man)

- Sexually assaulting a young woman because of her association with, and/or as a means of sending a message to, a rival gang member:

*"I remember a girl. She weren't going out with anyone, but she like used to sleep with just one gang... and this other gang... they seen her on the bus, dragged her off the bus, took her to...someone's house or whatever, made her like suck all their dicks and all that... and like videoed it, telling her to say like she'll piss on someone's grave and all sorts... and I remember seeing her in like local, and all the lads from the area were like switching her, and she was like crying like do you know what I mean? They made me do it, they had a knife to me and everything, and I was like, I could tell that she weren't lying anyway"* (Participant L2, 19 year old young woman)

As illustrated in the final quotation above, and previously explored in Chapter Two, some young women in these situations were both harmed and blamed, experiencing repeat victimisation within their own gang as punishment for transgressing gang expectations:

*"One time a girl was going out with a boy from one gang and she slept with a boy from another gang and the boy found out because obviously he called up and told him 'I slept with your girl'. Yeah and then when he asked the girl the girl didn't deny it so he must have acted like he forgave her and everything, so he told her to come to some house one time and at the house was 15 boys just waiting for that one girl and she had to sleep, have sex and give oral to all of them boys, like forced"* (Participant J, 16 year old young woman)

Whilst the expectation in virtually all of the gangs identified in the research was that young men would have as many sexual partners as they wished, and have largely free choice as to who these would be, the reverse was true of young women. Young women who engaged in any form of sexual relationship with gang-involved males were expected to be loyal to their partner (and his fellow gang-members if requested) and face the consequences should they breach this unwritten rule. Female relations of gang-involved males also experienced intense levels of control over their choice of sexual partner with similarly dire consequences should they choose to challenge this and engage in a sexual relationship with someone from a rival gang:

*"My friend's brother is a gang member and she [my friend] went out with another gang member from [a rival area] and her brother kicked off and then all the gang members from [her area] was kicking off to her... But then when she went out with somebody from the same area in a way they're like 'you're a slag because you're fucking one of my boys' so you can't win"* (Participant V, 19 year old young woman)

#### 3.4.2 Setting up rival gang members

Just under one-third of participants who identified examples of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation against young women, identified cases of young women setting up or being used to set up males in rival gangs. This typically involved young women expressing a sexual interest in, or engaging in a sexual relationship with, a male in order to gain information about their whereabouts or lure them to a pre-determined location where members of a rival gang would be waiting to attack them.

The degree to which young women were portrayed as victims or active agents within these scenarios varied somewhat among participants. Some participants (predominantly, although not exclusively males) construed the young women in these situations as manipulative and exploitative, acting on their own initiative, thereby feeding into the belief expressed by many gang-involved males that you cannot trust girls. Some female participants also placed the blame for these scenarios on young women, speaking derogatively of these 'set-up chicks' and disassociating themselves from 'girls like that':

*"Some of these girls are just really nasty" (Participant T2, 21 year old young woman)*

*"Basically me, I don't say this a lot, I don't hate but I H A T E set up chicks, honey traps, I hate all that, it angers me so much that girls can be so stupid at times...It happened to my mum's friend's son so it was close to home and from that happened I hated them... I just think why did you do that? Why is, why do you feel the need to set someone up, upset someone's life up like?...why are you gonna use your body cos lots of the girls that use their body, use their time, their voice, whatever to pull this guy closer so someone can take them. I don't understand it like" (Participant S, 14 year old young woman)*

Many others, however, questioned the degree to which these young women were acting in a free and informed manner, highlighting the fear, duress and/or power differential inherent in many of their circumstances. Whilst not minimising the victimisation of the targeted young men, they simultaneously recognised that the young women setting them up were, more often than not, also victims:

*"It's like my best friend who had a relationship with someone and they didn't know that he was in a gang... he was like about 18 and my friend's like the same age as me, so 14 and 18... and he was getting her to do things like sleep with this person to see what he does – 'see if he says anything about me. Get him to trust you and everything'... I was just really shocked when she told me that she actually did it because she was scared in case he did something to her. She said that she did it about three times with the same person and then came back and like this guy she slept with and her boyfriend ended up having a massive fight, like because obviously he'd begin to trust her and he was saying things about her boyfriend, so then she went back and told him what he was saying, they ended up fighting... I think this guy ended up getting stabbed or something but he's still alive" (Participant R2, 14 year old young woman)*

*"I have a cousin who set someone up and he got murdered and like I thought she must have thought they were just gonna beat him up, I don't think she thought he was gonna get shot... she kept on going round there and one night she said 'They're in here' and then they've done a drive by and someone's got shot in the head and he died. She had to get moved out of [the area]... It weren't her brothers what done it but her brothers and her cousins are all in this gang so that's why she done it, because it was her family who were telling her to do it, kind of thing." (Participant Z3, 18 year old young woman)*

Irrespective of the perceived motivation behind the act, young women who became involved in these types of scenarios also frequently experienced serious negative repercussions as a result of their actions. In a small number of cases (two that we were informed about) the young women ended up in prison as a result of their actions. In many more, they were ostracised within,

or forced to move from, their own communities and/or became the victims of physical or sexual violence as retribution for their perceived betrayal:

*"Well this was kind of her fault so ... well not her fault cos no-one deserves to get a rape but she started it... this girl set up a boy... he got beaten up really badly, like hospitalised so what they did, one day she was walking round where he was... and they saw her and they basically dragged her into a car and she was ...basically they raped her for what she did" (Participant S, 14 year old young woman)*

### 3.4.3 Sexually based initiation processes

Sexually based initiation processes involving young women (either seeking to be part of the gang themselves or as part of the process of male initiation) was the third form of gang-specific sexual violence/exploitation identified within the research:

*"This girl came to school upset really. She had sex with every boy in a gang just to be part of their gang, and it was really terrible when I heard about this, and I do remember, she came to school crying... I think it probably was under pressure, because she wanted to be a part of them and they gave her an option" (Participant W3, 16 year old young woman)*

*"It nearly happened to me once. I was in a gang, and the boys were like, if you want to stay in this gang, you have to have sex with me...And I'm like 'I have to? I don't have to do anything... d'you know what I'll see you another time' So I left" (Participant S3, 19 year old young woman)*

This type of scenario, although clearly a part of some young women's experiences of gangs, was less frequently identified than the other two gang-specific forms of sexual violence or exploitation outlined above.<sup>14</sup> What was much more frequently identified, however, was the closely related process of sexual activity or sexual relationships as a means of young women gaining and sustaining entry into the wider gang environment as explored in section 3.5.5 below.

## 3.5 Other forms of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation against young women

As highlighted previously, not all of the examples of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation identified within the research were necessarily unique to that environment. Participants identified a second set of sexually violent or sexually exploitative behaviours that, although clearly gang-associated (both in terms of the individuals perpetrating them and the context within which they occurred), were also observable in other peer-on-peer settings. Many of these scenarios share clear similarities with experiences reported by young people in

14 Initiation processes were more frequently linked with physical violence, robbery, drug dealing or other non-sexual offending behaviour



other studies into sexual exploitation and sexual violence unconnected to gangs (see, for example, *Barter et al 2009; Beckett and Schubotz 2013*).

Recognising this, participants were asked to consider how the experiences they identified within the gang environment might replicate or differ to those experienced by their peers in other social settings (see section 2.8). A minority of interviewees (primarily gang-involved young men) indicated there to be no significant difference between sex and relationships in gangs and other peer environments. Most others, however (9 out of 10 females and 7 out of 10 males) felt that although there were some similarities, there were more significant differences that had a particularly negative impact upon young women.

Contextualising their commentary with reference to the traditionally gendered and hierarchical nature of gangs and the normality of violence within this, they observed that sex and relationships in gangs were more frequently typified by disrespect for, manipulation of, and violence towards young women:

*“Sex within gangs is more aggressive, like it’s more with not just your partner, like with other people, it’s like a female is almost like an object, that she’s shared” (Participant O3, 18 year old young woman)*

*“When you’re in a gang there’s more pressure, because it might be more than one guy pressuring you. It might be the whole gang pressuring you so if you say no, it’s not just one person that might retaliate against you, it’s the whole gang” (Participant W, 21 year old young woman)*

*“Basically if she settles for somebody who isn’t gang based, she’s going to be a lot better off. I’m not saying she’s going to be treated better by this guy, but she won’t get into too much trouble... the whole dominant male thing in gangs... there are people back from all the gangs round here who will get girls involved which then will mess up their lives if you know what I mean and they will become, as you say, sort of passed on to the next guy and the next and so on and it’s really terrible... I mean I’ve known girls who, not drastically young, but from at least the age of 12 who’ve had this kind of stuff happen to them” (Participant O2, 16 year old young man)*

Participants highlighted a series of heightened risks that they felt young women faced within the context of the gang environment, including:

- Expectations of sexual activity with multiple partners;
- Unwilling involvement in illegal activity and the associated risks of arrest and prosecution; and
- The danger of violent retribution should they be perceived to transgress the rules of the gang.

Thinking more specifically about the motivations for, and explanations of, gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation, the range of rationales shared by the 95

participants who offered insights into this included both those that were directly and exclusively linked to inter-gang conflict and those that transcended both gang and peer-group scenarios (see Table 3.2).

**Table 3.2: Identified rationales for gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation**

	<i>Proportion identified by</i>
Behaviours not understood to be sexual violence or exploitation; conceptualised as accepted behaviour	51%
The victim deserved it/‘asked for it’	46%
Peer pressure	40%
Demonstration of status or power	39%
Inter-gang conflict	35%
Sexually motivated	33%
An attempt to gain status or respect	25%
A form of punishment, revenge or retaliation	25%
It was not sexual violence; the victim made false accusations	13%
Linked to initiation into the gang	13%

This is not to suggest that those incidents that were not identified as being exclusively motivated by inter-gang conflict were not differentially experienced within the gang environment. Indeed, the general consensus of interviewees was that when such incidents occurred within gangs they did so in a context of heightened risk and reduced capacity for self-determination, with potentially more serious and longer-term repercussions. The need to achieve status and demonstrate power, for example, was understood to be exaggerated within the gang environment, as indeed was the power of peer pressure. Similarly, whilst lack of understanding about the nature of sexual offending, the role of free and informed consent, and the judgement and blaming of young women, is certainly not unique to the gang environment, these were understood to be heightened within that hyper-masculine setting. The examples of sexual violence and exploitation that follow, although not unique to the gang environment, should be viewed in light of this particular culture and heightened risk.

**3.5.1 Creation and distribution of sexual images**

Half of the participants who identified examples of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation against young women, did so with reference to sexual images being created and distributed via social media, frequently without the explicit knowledge or consent of the person in the photograph or recording:

*“There was a video sent round on Bebo, well there’s been a couple sent round, and there was a girl lying there in a bed, and one lad come and then he would*

*leave. Another lad would come and he'd leave, and I felt sorry for the girl... She was just lying there. She wasn't doing nothing, so you don't know she's been told 'you got to lie there' or you don't know if she's just said 'yeah, do it' (Participant E2, 17 year old young woman)*

Whilst many participants were keen to emphasise that such incidents should not be viewed as 'gang behaviours', given the frequency with which they occur outside of gangs, there were a number of examples shared that were explicitly linked to inter-gang conflict. These examples tended to centre round young women engaging in sexual activity whilst displaying gang colours, making gang gestures and/or issuing challenges to rival gangs. As noted above, they also included cases in which sexual assaults of young women from rival gangs were recorded and distributed:

*"In gangs if it goes wrong, then you have the whole gang on your back. They like to gang rape you. I've seen pictures. There's one going round my college – a girl has a sign up saying 'I'm a slag' with her clothes off, naked, crying her eyes out, everything, with bandanas in the background" (Participant H2, 18 year old young woman)*

### 3.5.2 Rape and other sexual assaults

Cases of gang-associated rape or other contact sexual assaults against young women were shared (though not always described as such) by over half (55%) of the 96 participants who identified forms of sexual violence or exploitation within the gang environment:

- 41% identified cases of individual perpetrator rape;
- 34% identified cases of multiple perpetrator rape;
- 11% identified cases of sexual violence or exploitation under threat of a weapon; and
- 23% identified other forms of sexual assault.

Although rape and sexual assaults by individuals were observed to occur within the gang environment (see example below) participants rarely identified these as being gang-sanctioned or gang-motivated behaviours, more frequently attributing them to an individually based deviance, rather than any group based influences:

*"So as we come out of the living room, we was in the hallway and I've knocked on the bathroom door and I was like 'can I use the toilet please' and there was a lad in there and I could hear a girl screaming, and I obviously go 'open the door' and he wouldn't do it, so my boyfriend booted in the door, and when we went in there we found her bent across a bath backwards and him on top trying to kiss her and her top all ripped, and he is in a gang" (Participant E2, 17 year old young woman)*

*"You'd have to be sick to do that kind of thing" (Participant I3, 18 year old young man)*

Multiple perpetrator rape and other forms of sexual assault perpetrated by multiple individuals were, on the other hand, more likely to be explicitly linked to gang

influences, with many participants conceptualising some forms of these (those not explicitly identified as sexual violence or exploitation) as part and parcel of accepted activities within that particular environment:

*"Like the person can get raped or get passed on to their friend, or, like, fuck them and go, then pass them to their friend and that [R: How might that happen when someone gets raped?] Boys go to meet, like, tell the girl to come meet them, and when they're there, he doesn't tell her that he's with the other people, and so when she comes in the house and then, like, basically have sex with her, then he tells his friend to go in as well to have sex with the girl as well, and then they just start taking turns and that, and then sometimes the girl says stop, but they just carry on" (Participant P, 17 year old young man)*

*"[R: How/why did you get out of the gang] ...The boys committed a crime ...As a young female I wouldn't want to go through that so I cut them off [R: Was it a sexual offence?] Yes, against a very young girl. Three are in prison because of it. One is in a mental asylum cos he knew what he'd done was wrong. The other two don't care ...It's not about sex and relationships though, it's more about power, having that control" (Participant J3, 16 year old young woman)*

*"There is a lot of cases where rapes happen. I mean there was a case recently right which all my ex-friends, some of them still are my friends... this girl, she's saying that they raped her. Now they got off with the charge, it got took to court and there was not enough... she was contradicting herself loads but my personal opinion and I've told my friends this... cos rape's not, one thing that in gangs and stuff like that, rape's not accepted.... I told them straight. I said I think you've did it... I think yeah she has exaggerated and... she's added things on in her head cos she's confused... for one thing that she was saying that they had anal sex with her and that didn't happen but it come out that basically somebody got a chair leg and put it up her so... I said the pain of that... It would have felt... I told them straight and they're in denial, they're in denial to this day saying that they didn't do it... it was like seven or eight of them that got put up in court for it and they know, each one of them know, that basically, I know they did it and more or less everybody knows that they kind of did... I think she was up to doing half of them and because she was up for that I think they just... this girls up for everything... I mean they shown footage of it in court where they're all together after it laughing and joking and doing like chair actions and actions of what happened to the girl and absolutely laugh, screaming their heads off at it... the only reason they're still accepted, because they got cleared of it... they will never come out and say it in front of, even in front of their own gang members... Never in a million years would they cos they know like there would be consequences to it or people... But like the violent side of it is fully accepted, like it's seen as a normal..." (Participant N, 24 year old young man)*

*"There was a girl who got gang raped. She lost drugs she was holding for her boyfriend. He'd given her a package to hold and there was a family gathering and the package went missing. She tried to tell the boy."*



*She said I'll make it up to you; I'll do anything. So he said 'line up' and she said ok, but she didn't turn up and then she put on Facebook 'my ex-boyfriend's a waster'. So then he said 'meet me, lets beat' but he didn't go. He sent his boys and they raped her"* (Participant R, 15 year old young man)

*"Most girls get used in gangs... unless they're in relationships or their families are higher, then these girls are probably going to get used at some point in their life"* (Participant M2, 21 year old young man)

### Understanding of rape

Discussions about rape and other sexual assaults were particularly polarised by gender. Whilst females generally identified cases of rape as such, many males struggled to reconcile their understanding of 'rape' as a concept with their actual experiences. As illustrated in the quotations below, many young men expressed clear abhorrence at the idea that a young man might rape a young woman:

*"I've never seen a girl get raped. I wouldn't let a girl get raped. I'd punch the boy that raped her 100% because then I'd think just imagine if that was my mum or my little sister"* (Participant F2, 15 year old young man)

*"Rapist...that's something gang members don't like to be titled with and something you'd want to stay away from"* (Participant U2, 20 year old young man)

It was, however, clear that many of the young men who expressed such abhorrence to the idea of rape had a very narrow understanding of what rape actually entailed. Many viewed it only in terms of an act perpetrated by a violent stranger, failing to recognise that it could also include acts occurring within a relational setting:

*"The girl like, she will see it as rape because she was getting forced. He will see it as 'I'm in control, I'm the boss, this is what's going to happen... He feels in control of the streets anyway so he'll feel in control of anything. So he'll want things to go his way, so he won't be thinking 'oh this is rape', when it actually is"* (Participant G3, 15 year old young women)

*"I don't really use the term rape. Yeah, it's not talked about as rape, they just say, 'This is what happened, we took her to the house and told her to do this and she did it. They don't say, 'We forced her.' Most of the time they don't even force them, as I said, once they've implemented that fear into them it's easy to get what you want"* (Participant S2, 18 year old young man)

As previously noted in section 2.7, many participants' understanding of the concepts of coercion and consent, and their implications for the legality or illegality of their activities, were very limited. Consent to sexual activity was generally assumed to exist unless there were clear indications to the contrary, rather than actively sought and explicitly granted. Taken together with the objectification and disempowerment of young women within the gang environment, and the sense of entitlement displayed by many gang-involved males, this resulted in a very high-risk environment for young women, in which their sexual experiences are primarily determined and shaped by the agendas of others:

### 3.5.3 Sex with multiple individuals

Almost one in three participants (29%) identified cases in which young women had engaged in group-based sexual activity with multiple individuals. Whilst the concurrent presence of multiple individuals, in and of itself, is not necessarily violent or exploitative, the imbalance of power and/or the presence of coercion highlighted in most such cases, clearly is. Similarly, whilst such scenarios are not unique to the gang environment, participants did feel that they were particularly common in gangs, noting the frequency with which gang-involved males 'shared' their sexual partners with fellow gang members, expecting the young women to go along with this unquestioningly:

*"It does depend on what type of girl you are. If you're easy to get, then you're easy to get. Everyone's got you straightaway. Cos if one member of the gang finds out a girl's easy to get, she'll get passed around"* (Participant G, 14 year old young woman)

*"He will tell her to come meet him while he's with all his friends... then she would come and then realise that she'll be with, the whole gang's there and most of them will probably end up having sex with her as well, if it's not his actual girl... the boy that tells the girl to come will try and convince her to have sex with all his other friends as well. He would go first and then he will just convince her after he's finished to have sex with like second, the third, the fourth boy, the fifth and it goes on and on"* (Participant O, 16 year old young man)

*"Like just go round the whole of the gang giving brain an that... Like if one boy gets a blow job, then another wants it... he expects it, obviously. Why not? If she's giving blow jobs, she might as well give me some"* (Participant F2, 15 year old young man)

*"That happens a lot. It could be eight guys and one girl. All having intercourse, taking turns really. More or less treating the girl like a piece of meat. Some of the guys will either give the girl drugs, spike her drink, or get her absolutely wasted... The odd girl acts up for it cos they think 'he likes me' or 'they like me', but sometimes the guys take it one step further and say 'do you want drinks?' and then the girl's 'okay', and just drinking and having a smoke or something and then that's what ends up happening. If the girl and guy are doing something they could easily just take one text when the girl ain't looking and all of his mates are around... If the girl is a known slag then they think it's right, but if the girl is somebody that they know but doesn't sleep around then they're like 'no-no-no'. But if she's somebody that will sleep around with 10 guys a week then they're like 'this is normal for her'. Cos if the girl's poor treating herself as she's easy then she's gonna get treated easy, and it don't matter how many guys do it... I've known a girl that that's happened to"* (Participant V, 19 year old young woman)

As is the case in all of the examples cited above, all the instances of sexual activity with multiple individuals shared within the research involved one or a small number of young women with many more young men. Two forms of group-based sexual activity were particularly commonly identified:

- Giving oral sex to a group of young men one after another (frequently referred to as a line-up or train); and
- Full sexual intercourse with a series of young men (either all in a room at once or entering the room one after another).

### **Consent in group-based scenarios**

The degree to which these scenarios were portrayed as consensual activity varied significantly across the range of examples shared. Some participants explicitly identified an absence of consent on the part of the young women, either because the young woman clearly expressed her lack of consent (she said no) or because she may not have had capacity to consent due to the provision and/or consumption of drugs or alcohol (see examples in section 3.5.2 above). Many more, however, failed to apply any critical questioning to the degree to which young women were providing free and informed consent in these scenarios, or indeed (as explored in section 3.7.3) the degree to which all young men involved were freely consenting.

Participants' responses to the question of consent reveal not only a great deal of uncertainty but also an apparent indifference to whether consent is sought or given, suggesting that in some gangs, this form of sexual victimisation may effectively be normalised. The issues of consent and coercion, whilst relevant to most forms of sexual activity occurring within gangs, are particularly problematic when applied to group-based sexual activities. Two particular issues of concern emerge in relation to this:

- Assumed transferability of consent; and
- A failure to recognise the impact the group environment can have on a young person's ability to provide free and informed consent.

### **Assumed transferability of consent**

Considering first the issue of assumed transferability of consent, in a number of the scenarios described by participants there appeared to be an underlying assumption that if a young woman has consented to have sex with one member of a gang she has, by default, consented to engage in any form of sexual activity they choose, with whomever they choose:

*"She has decided that she wants to go and have sex with someone but she may have to face the consequences of having sex with more than one person... She may not like it, she may like it, but that's just what happens"* (Participant 03, 18 year young woman)

*"I know people that have bought a good seven men to a girl's house and all of them have done what they've*

*done to her. Not rape, it's just like that girl had wanted it to happen, or not necessarily wanted it to happen but she basically asked for it but she didn't ask for it, if you know what I mean [R: how did she ask for it] Say I was talking to a girl and I'm saying to her this weekend I'm coming to your house, or asked her even not told her, and she was like yeah all right then. But I'm saying I'm coming with a couple of my friends and she's like yeah all right then. If I got there and I was with seven people and she was just her and her friend and she let us all inside, we didn't force our way inside she just let us inside... That's basically her asking for it, innit, really... She could easily speak up really... We're not rapists, we're not gonna pin her down and have our way with her... All she's gotta do is make one noise and me and my friends would go into the room, what's going on? I've been with my friends and one of my friends is trying to move to the next girl but going about it in the wrong way, as soon as he'd touch her or something and she didn't want it, I'd stand in the way, she obviously don't want nothing, you get me? I wouldn't let him group set her up"* (Participant B, 16 year old young man)

This assumed transferability of consent has clear implications for all parties involved. For the young woman, it means an imposed abdication of her right to exercise self-determination and a clear denial of her right to control what sexual activity she chooses to engage in. For the young men, who have assumed absolution from the responsibility to seek and obtain consent, it can mean they are engaging in sexual offending without realising it.

### **Free and informed choice?**

This issue of unwittingly engaging in sexual offending was not restricted to situations of assumed transferable consent. Many of the situations in which all individuals engaged in a group-sex scenario were understood to have sought and given consent, could also be seen to constitute sexual offending when viewed through the lens of free and informed consent. Considering the scenarios presented below, for example: although on the surface it might appear that the young woman has freely consented to have sex with all the individuals concerned, the provision of this consent must be viewed in light of the context within which it was obtained. Remembering that consent is defined as 'agreeing by choice, and having the freedom and capacity to make that choice', questions must be asked as to whether these young women felt that declining sexual activity was actually a valid option for them, given they were surrounded by a group of young men who were known for their control of, and violence towards, young women:

*"Like a conveyor belt, no break, just like bang, bang, bang... My friend was there, he checked and she was up for it"* (Participant D2, 23 year old young man - talking about a 17 year old girl being passed around 18 male gang-members)

*"I've done it before myself like, there's been one girl there and she's fully on it, she's saying 'all you's can, all of you's' and there's like six guys in a room 'all of you's' and I'm thinking 'no'. Yeah, I've seen,*

*it's horrible and I don't like, I don't like that stuff, man 'cause the girl looks sad, oh it looks a mess after she's gone... someone who call her up, speak to her, say 'got a couple of me and my friends here, just chillin' and getting liquor, do you want to come? Bit of weed to smoke', 'yeah, yeah, I'll come' ...sometimes they bring one, another friend, sometimes they come on their own, sometimes they come with couple of 'em,"* (Participant N2, 16 year old young man)

### 3.5.4 Sexual activity in exchange for money or other tangible goods

Almost half (47%) of those who identified examples of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation did so with reference to the exchange of sex for money (23%) or sex in return for other tangible goods (39%), most frequently drugs and/or alcohol or the discharge of a debt associated with these:

*"My lot got girls off the street, give them drugs and then get them to sleep with the men – they've fed it them say for a few months and then they will get them to sleep with the men... but they take all the money off them and give them £10 and give them crack when they've just made a lot more than £10 from what they're doing"* (Participant Y, 17 year old young woman)

*"There's boys around the area that show up, like sell weed and everything, and if you don't have no money on you and you want to buy some, they would ask you if you want to do anything with them to get it for free... I remember the last time I asked them to give it to me on tick... the boy was about 20 years old and I was 14. I'm like 'I'm 14 – are you mad?' and he's like 'oh, come to the block, innit... I'll give you £10 worth of weed'"* (Participant K3, 16 year old young woman)

*"They're like drug houses and you'd sit there all day with your drugs and the crack heads and the smack heads would come in and out, in and out... You'd have two rooms and then you'd have prostitutes paying you to use the rooms while you're sitting in the living room moving all your drugs and stuff like this. So what they'll be doing is, they'll be having sex with their punters, paying you for using the room. So you'll be getting every last bit of money that they have cos they'll be paying for the room and they're buying the drugs they need of you"* (Participant F3, 21 year old young man)

*"She could have misplaced something that's valuable to them and then sometimes the guy might even brothel you. Like make you his sort of sexing person. Not personally, it will be personally but you also do it to other people and then when the money comes he gets it until you pay off your debt... Before they decide how they're gonna make the girl pay them back or whatever, they do actually look at how the girl sort of is and if she's a sort of sexually active person they'll just say, "Alright then, I might as well use you for sexual activities. If they're not so sexually active you just say, "Alright then, you're gonna do jobs for me. You might have to deliver this, go pick up that, hold this for me until I feel you've paid off the debt."* (Participant S2, 18 year old young man)

As illustrated by the examples above, the cases of sexual activity in exchange for tangible goods identified within the research involved varying degrees of organisation and control. Some involved just the victim and perpetrator in an ad-hoc arrangement to offset some form of debt, whilst others were clearly orchestrated by third parties who financially benefitted from the arrangements.

### 3.5.5 Sexual activity in exchange for status, protection or other non-tangible rewards

Money, drugs and alcohol were not the only factors identified as being exchanged for sexual activity within the gang environment. One of the most frequently identified forms of sexual exploitation (identified by half of those who identified cases of sexual violence or exploitation) was that of sexual activity in exchange for non-tangible goods, specifically status and/or protection. Whilst sexual activity for status and/or protection is certainly not unique to the gang environment, the motivations underpinning it and the particular conceptualisation of it are.

In a world where 'respect' and 'status' are the most desirable and powerful forms of social capital, the need to achieve these is acutely heightened. Similarly, in a world where significant violence is a lived reality, the need to link oneself into protective structures is equally pertinent. As previously highlighted in Chapter Two, the social construction of the gang and the secondary status afforded young women within this, makes it difficult for them to achieve these outcomes in their own right. In the absence of an existing familial relationship (for example, a brother or cousin being involved in the gang), sex or relationships becomes one of the only ways in which a young woman can gain and/or sustain entry into the gang environment:

*"If you are a high profile gang member, you could be the ugliest guy and I don't know how, this girl will still like you ...I just think obviously she wants that reputation, she likes his reputation, she knows 400 per cent that with that reputation comes money, comes protection, ain't no-one gonna mess with her. She could walk down the road in his block and they'll be like that's [name's] girl, don't mess with her. She knows 400 per cent if she walks down the road and gets jumped by a bunch of girls that she'll get helped cos she's his girl, cos that's how it is"* (Participant F, 23 year old young man)

*"It's a fact of knowing nothing's going to happen to you – nothing in this world is going to happen to you while you've got him as your boyfriend and I think that's more security – and they buy you everything"* (Participant Y, 17 year old young woman)

*"If a boy's doing a lot of crime on the roads girls think it's cool. So girls wouldn't even care how he is on the inside, they just care because he's got a name because his name's on everybody's lips. I'd say that's what will attract a girl to a boy in a gang to be honest"* (Participant X3, 17 year old young man)

*"A lot of girls when they're young and vulnerable and haven't got a mind of their own, they see these guys driving the big cars and they wanna be part of that so*



*they'll basically do whatever it takes to get in with that crowd so they get known. They might be known for all the wrong reasons but still their names out there and they just wanna be recognised as part of a gang. In their mind they are part of a gang because they're sleeping with the guys and they're in that environment but the gang members don't see them as gang members, they just see them as a tool, so they're just there for when they need them... Like I said, they want to be known and they want to be affiliated with that gang and maybe to sleep with a gang member is the only way they're gonna get noticed as being part of a gang, even though the gang members don't see them as a gang member, they're just there"*  
(Participant V2, 27 year old young woman)

As previously explored in Chapter Two, there was often a clear disconnect between young women's expectations of status and protection within these environments, and the reality that ensued, with many finding that the benefits and protections they had assumed would follow failed to materialise.

### 3.5.6 Pressure to engage in sexual activity

Pressure to engage in sexual activity was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most frequently cited form of sexual violence or exploitation identified within the research (identified by 65% of participants as impacting upon young women within the gang environment). The existence of such pressure, and the various ways in which it manifests itself, have already been demonstrated throughout earlier sections of this chapter, and in earlier discussions about consent in Chapter Two, and as such will not be repeated at this point. What are however useful to reiterate, are some of the contextual factors contributing to the frequency with which young women experienced pressure to engage in sexual activity within the gang environment. These include:

- The particular challenges presented by pressure to engage in sexual activity when occurring in a context of other forms of violence and exploitation;
- A lack of understanding about consent and a failure to recognise that pressure to engage in sexual activity negates the granting of free and informed consent – across both males and females; and
- The likely under-reporting of rape and other sexual assaults as a result of this.

The implications of these, and other contextual factors, are considered in Chapter Four.

## 3.6 Relationship between role and risk of sexual victimisation

Before proceeding to an exploration of the forms of sexual violence impacting upon young men within the gang environment (see section 3.7 below), it is worth pausing to consider the ways in which young women's exposure to these forms of sexual victimisation appear to vary according to their status within the gang. As previously noted in section 2.4, participants' narratives

indicated a number of different 'roles' for young women within the gang environment, each of which held variable exposure to risk of sexual, and other forms of, victimisation. Five specific roles were identified in participants' discourse around this. For the purposes of comparative description these have been categorised as:

- Gang-involved young women ('gangster girls');
- Female family members;
- Girlfriends ('wifeys');
- Young women who have children with gang-involved males ('baby-mothers'); and
- Young women in casual sexual 'relationships' ('links').

Before considering the variable experiences of the young women within these roles, it is important to highlight the following underpinning factors:

- These categorisations are in no way mutually exclusive, with some young women in two or more roles simultaneously (sister of one gang-involved male and girlfriend of another, for example) or moving between them over time;
- The roles that different young women can attain, and the degree to which they can retain these, are generally determined by young men;
- Any potential protections offered by these roles are at best precarious and can easily be withdrawn; and
- When considering risk, we must address both internal risk within the gang and external risk as a result of a young woman's (perceived) association with it.

### 3.6.1 Gang-involved young women ('gangster girl')

The role of 'gangster girl' was the only one in which young women's status was constructed without explicit reference to their association with a gang-involved young man. It is interesting to note that the minority of young women who were able to 'access' these roles in male or mixed-gender gangs were those who adopted a masculine presentation and became 'one of the guys':

*"I've been involved in a lot of stuff... I would say I was a bit stupid because then when I started hanging around with [this gang] and I started drinking, smoking, everything, then I started getting into fights with them lot, going into other areas fighting, got myself into trouble... if you can fight or if you can look after yourself you'll get respected... I helped them sell drugs so because I'd been involved in selling drugs for them, they didn't see me as someone to just have sex with or stuff like that, they saw me as a runner basically... I wasn't thinking about what if I get used as one of these girls and stuff like that, at the time I was thinking money, money, money... The rape and stuff would happen in different rooms but I'm still in the house. I know what's happening but at the time I will admit nothing like that ever come through my head. I dunno why, it was like I saw myself as a boy, one of them, I dunno why, nothing like that ever, ever, ever came into my head... I think the way I dress and the way I make myself look has made a lot of things*

*stop happening because I intend to make myself look like a boy, I intend to make sure boys don't look at me cos c'mon, if a girl is walking down the street and she looks like a boy, she's got a hood up and everything, tracksuit bottoms, what boy is gonna wanna be seen with a girl like that, c'mon* (Participant I2, 18 year old young woman)

*"A gangster girl goes and dresses like a man. In other words, the gold and tattoos and, you know, a tomboyish girl basically who's willing to hold a gun when needed. One of them brave ones. Cause to be in a gang, you have to have them skills, gang skills innit... It's how to get respect from men, if a girls in a gang. Because some men will try and have sex with her and she's not going to know how to react, how to call it up and let them know 'nah, it's , we're just in a gang, we ain't need to be doing no sex'. So some girls have a talent to that, to say no, innit, and they will still respect them... They'll do it cooly, they'll make it into a joke and laugh it off with the guy 'Out of all them sexy girls!' like, just act like they are one of the guys. Cause for a girl to be in a gang she has to be like a man"* (Participant Z, 22 year old young woman)

Both young men and young women viewed the young women in these roles as largely protected from vulnerability to sexual exploitation and sexual violence because of their status within the gang, their masculine presentation and/or their ability to assert their own agency in a situation. A few of the young women interviewed spoke with admiration of how these young women managed unwanted sexual attention, envious of their ability to say no and still be respected, reinforcing the belief that this was atypical of most young women's experiences within the gang environment.

### 3.6.2 Female family members

Although not necessarily associated with a gang in their own right, and often not wishing to be so, female relations of gang-involved young men were frequently deemed to be associated with gangs because of their relationship by birth. As illustrated in the quotations below, this association appeared to offer some young women a degree of protection from sexual violence or exploitation by members of the gang with which their male relative was involved:

*"If it's to do with sisters they'll have a lot more respect for the guy's sister. But if it's another girl then they can treat her like absolute dirt, they could wipe her face in dirt, anything. But when it comes to a sister there's that kind of borderline, like the guys would never look at a sister and go 'ooh, I could sleep with her' but if it's another girl then they go 'oh well, I can have sex with you, my friend can get involved, I don't care'"* (Participant V, 19 year old young woman)

*"There was girls that like, now that I look back I know that basically they were getting used for sex and stuff but we was never like that, but I think it's cos my friends were like people's little sisters and stuff like that, so we got treated differently to how other girls would. So we'd be allowed to sit and chill with them all and things like that, whereas they wouldn't if*

*that makes sense"* (Participant L2, 19 year old young woman)

The same association, however, did expose these young women to considerable risk in other ways. As noted previously in section 3.4.1, participants identified many different examples of young women being targeted because of their relationship with a gang-involved young male. As illustrated in the examples provided both earlier and below, sisters, and other female relatives, were at particular risk of both sexual and other forms of harm as a result of this:

*"If they're close to someone, well it depends how serious the beef is. If it's very serious they would attack your sister. Going out with the sister, that happens too – some try to do that"* (Participant Q2, 20 year old young man)

*"Like my friend, it happened to her in the past... She was walking in the park and there was a gang of boys and then that [rape] happened to her... that's cos of who her brother was. Cos's he's a top boy, they thought cos they can't get to him, cos I think he was in jail, they can't get to him, they'll get to her"* (Participant M2, 21 year old young man)

*"Well my stepbrother was in a gang and he was really high in a gang so I went to another area and I was walking to go to my friend's house and I heard people calling me but I had my headphones in and I didn't wanna pay no one attention. I got assaulted. I got punched in my face three times but I hit back as well because I know how to fight, so when I was punching him he just ran off, but I actually got assaulted because of who my brother was"* (Participant J, 16 year old young woman)

As previously noted in section 2.5.2 participants also shared examples of female relations inadvertently getting caught up in physical violence targeted at their male relatives:

*"I got shot in my sister's garden, they came to her garden, she's sitting on the gate and they came from the back and just started shooting and I just run off – they're just lucky they missed"* (Participant F, 23 year old young man)

Female relatives of gang-involved men (sisters in particular) also experienced considerable levels of control over the expression of their sexuality and/or their choice of who they wished to have a relationship with, with serious repercussions should they choose to disregard this:

*"I was with a guy from [\*\*\*\*]. That's the opposite gang. I tried to keep it like silent for a bit, but then in the end everyone found out so it was just like, I was like split in between the two. So it was like my family or him sorta thing... we just thought why shouldn't we be together, d'you know what I mean, cos I wasn't in a gang, I would never done anything like set people up or anything like that, I wasn't like that... now cos I start seen with them they're thinking oh she's this, she's that, she's that and they think ah you're shady, shady and he told me I mustn't come back to [my area] else he's gonna hit, box my face. And these*

*are people that I grew up with. They put gang over everything, so they're just like, no like they basically turned on me" (Participant K2, 15 year old young woman)*

*really bad for you. For you and the guy you slept with, if anybody finds out. So both of your lives would be at risk, definitely. If you're with that person you cannot try to do any form of cheating, and if your partner finds out it could end very badly" (Participant X2, 22 year old young woman)*

### 3.6.3 Girlfriends ('Wifeys')

Girlfriends or 'wifeys' (those in a recognised relationship with gang-involved males) were observed to experience many similar risks to familial relations of gang-involved young men, in terms of risk of violence from rival gangs:

*"Because they're not gonna wanna go for the guy, they might wanna go for you, they might wanna go for your child you know... I think it's very easy... because that's the easiest place for him to get hurt as well" (Participant B3, 23 year old young woman)*

*"There was some negative cos people found out that that was his girlfriend. So like his enemies. Like what's the word, if you can't get him, get your nearest and dearest so when people found out that he was going out with her, like his enemies, she used to get beaten up or punched in the face... the girl has to be more wary, like she can't enter this type of area, she can't enter that, looking over her shoulder every minute. In a normal relationship you don't have to do that" (Participant P2, 17 year old young woman)*

*"[R: Would people ever try to get at you through your girlfriend?] Yeah, that happens. Beat em up, stab em, kick em up, whatever. Take their clothes of them, make them walk home naked and that. There's loads of stuff... That's why mine's always close to me. If she's not at my house then she's where I know. She's only across the road now, I don't let her go far" (Participant F3, 21 year old young man)*

Also like familial relations, girlfriends were noted to have a protected status within their boyfriend's gang; as one 16 year old young man explained it: *"they would know not to mess with my girlfriend"* (Participant Y2). This protected status was, however, much more tenuous than that afforded to family members, lasting only so long as the relationship did. Indeed the transition from protected girlfriend to targeted victim was very rapid for many young women – when they tried to end the relationship or were seen as having transgressed (the young man's) expectations within it:

*"I know a few girls who've been involved with gang members who are really at a high level, like they're really well known gang members, and if they try to leave their partners they will be threatened to get beaten up or shot. Cos obviously gang members have their one girlfriend who everybody knows, that's their main girl, and then they will have like other girls they just sleep with for the fun of it. But if the main girl ever tried to walk away it's like her life will be at risk if she does, because it's like she's stuck in that cycle of 'okay I can't go anywhere'. So in a sense it feels like it's some sort of protection, but in another way ... if you're involved with a gang member who's got a very, very high name and everyone knows you as his girlfriend, if you sleep with anybody in his circle or cheat in his circle, then yeah things could get really,*

*"She wants to leave, then she may have to face the consequence of that...when I was at school that was common.. [R: what might those consequences be?]... maybe rape... so like even if she didn't want to have sex with someone else in the gang she would have to. It's just nasty the things that people have to do" (Participant G2, 18 year old young woman)*

Expectations of young women were very different from those of their male partners. Where it was permissive for gang-involved young men to have many sexual partners in addition to their girlfriend, young women were forbidden from, and punished for, doing so. Intimate partner violence, including extreme physical violence, was prevalent in many such relationships. Young women's behaviours were frequently tightly controlled by their boyfriends, both in terms of who they could associate with and where they could go. Where some gang-involved young men kept their girlfriends distinct from their gang-activities, many others got drawn into this and exposed to illegality and other forms of harm as a result of this:

*"When I was with them, it was always like shit, drugs, police, drugs... I'm more relaxed [now in relationship with someone not in gang], I can finally do something with my life... I got dragged into carrying in the street. I've had a few thousand pounds worth of drugs in my handbag just walking around with them. I've had drugs in my house.... my houses have been raided before... my boyfriend had the key to my house and has stored bad stuff in there" (Participant Y, 17 year old young woman)*

*"My baby mum now is my hood girl, like she's always ready, wherever I am, she is, if you know what I mean so she's down for whatever so whatever I say goes off, like she's on... like if I was to pass her a bag of drugs, she'll hold that down for me. If I'm saying, I'm ringing and saying 'go and drop this off this, go and drop that off there, keep the money', like she'll do that" (Participant F3, 21 year old young man)*

*"So when I was staying at her house she was, obviously people knew, everybody started knowing and it started getting out that I'm staying at her house and she had two little sisters, she had one that was 13 at the time and she had one that was six, and the opposite gang started hearing that's where I'm sleeping and that's where I stay and they must have come one time and shot through her windows. They shot through her windows, her little sister was in the living room, they shot through the windows and everything" (Participant N, 24 year old young man)*

### 'Out of area' girlfriends

Before proceeding to a consideration of the experiences of young women in other roles, it is worth noting the



experiences of a distinct sub-group of girlfriends – ‘out of area’ girlfriends. As the name suggests, these young women were generally from different geographical areas, often with no prior exposure to the gang environment. For most of these young women, their relationship with a gang-involved young man did not result in any interaction with the wider gang culture; from their perspective his gang-involvement was incidental to their relationship. Having maintained a physical and often emotional distance from the gang environment, contributions from participants would suggest that these young women might not be exposed to the same degree of risk as the other girlfriends outlined above or the other ‘out of area’ girls in less established relationships outlined in section 3.6.5 below. Participants’ contributions would suggest that this is true both in terms of likelihood of rival gangs targeting them because of their relationship with a gang-involved male and in terms of likelihood of retribution for relationship breakdown, but this is something that requires further investigation, as is the other forms of risk that they may be exposed to.

### 3.6.4 Young women who have children with gang-involved males (‘baby mothers’)

Unlike the other categories of young women considered here, there was no clear consensus amongst participants as to the experiences of, and levels of risk, among young women with children to gang-involved males (often referred to as ‘baby-mothers’). Some participants talked of young women achieving an elevated status via pregnancy by a gang-involved male, whilst others spoke of it in primarily negative terms:

*“Baby mums get respect. If you’re a gang member’s baby mum then you’re going to be looked after and respected by the whole gang, but if you’re just a girl that’s rolling within a gang, you’ll probably be treated like shit to be fair” (Participant F3, 21 year old young man)*

*“Once a girl falls pregnant, that’s it. They don’t want nothing to do with them anymore, so then she’s stuck by herself... One guy could have kids to two other girls. He couldn’t care, d’ye know what I’m saying? As long as he’s got offspring he’s a big man” (Participant X, 21 year old young woman)*

*“Cos I’ve got a kid to a gang member from the same area as me and that’s what makes it harder for people to trust me. I try and explain to them he’s not involved, we was just drunk, that’s it, that’s the end of it, but people don’t see it that way, they’re like ‘you’ve had it to a gang member... I’ve told him you ain’t seeing your daughter until you’ve stopped these drugs, cos I have drug dealers coming to my house and saying ‘your ex owes me money’ or trying to break in my house to get stuff back for your debts. I’m thinking I can’t be bothered with all that... When she’s older I don’t want people from different areas saying ‘your dad’s a gang member’, I just want her to have at least a better life than what I’ve really had... Even though you’re changing and everything, you wanna do something better, it’s still be a part of your life and everybody will still look at it like that... And the worst thing is trying to find a boyfriend or a girlfriend, because some guys*

*don’t want to get with you because of you’ve been out with an ex-gang member or you’re related to a gang member, people are like ‘you’ve got a kid to somebody’ so it’s more harder to find a relationship with somebody else... But it’s extra hard now being related to what people call a gang member, having a gang member baby dad and having a kid. They’re the three things that are hard for me so far” (Participant C, 23 year old young woman)*

Whilst the limited data on this particular issue does not allow any concrete assertions as to why this might be, it does indicate that these variable experiences may, at least in part, be dependent on the original status of the young woman, with girlfriends more likely to experience benefits as a result of pregnancy and ‘links’ more likely to experience negative repercussions. That said, even those young women who maintained a relationship post pregnancy, could end up raising the child on their own should their partner be imprisoned as was the case for a number of the young women identified in the interviews. This had clear implications both for them and their child:

*“I know loads of girls now, like girls that have had babies and that and the baby’s dad ain’t there, coz they’re locked up... that child is going to grow up in a dysfunctional lifestyle. Like the child ain’t gonna grow up with no dad [R: are there a lot of girls that you think are that in situation?] ...A lot, a lot of girls. About ten girls that I could say now” (Participant W2, 20 year old young man)*

*“Like one of my friends the other day said, cos their baby father is locked up, saying how she had to stop her daughter going to the visits because when she was actually going there she was putting out her arms ready for them to search her. How can a child get used to doing that? When she’s seen that she said no, she’s not going back there” (Participant T2, 21 year old young woman)*

### 3.6.5 Young women in casual sexual ‘relationships’ (‘links’)

Young women who engaged in casual sexual interactions with one or more members of the gang (also known as ‘links’ or ‘pass arounds’) were the group of young women noted to be most at risk of sexual violence and exploitation within the gang environment. According to participants, these young women were most frequently aged between 12/13 and 16 years of age, with older young women less likely to be drawn to the false promise of these roles:

*“I think those that get involved, most girls like do tend to get involved are younger because they get involved because they like that these guys have cars and money and stuff like that, and then obviously they tend to grow older and grow out of the situation I would say, and realise really what’s going on in the real world, because when you’re a child you all think you’re loved up and it’s not anything like that is it?” (Participant C3, 18 year old young woman)*

As previously explored in section 2.4, there was a clear disconnect between how many of the young women

in these roles viewed their status and the benefits they thought it would bring them, and how it was actually experienced by them:

*"Like a link... You're not really going out with the girl, but the girl probably, like, likes you or has feelings for you, so she probably want to get to know you and that. Well, obviously, the boy's intention is, I just want to fuck you, and then, obviously, the girl's gonna think, oh, yeah, I'll do it with him, then hopefully he'll probably love me, like, ask me out or something"* (Participant P, 17 year old young man)

*"She goes in narrow-mindedly thinking these people are going to look after me and they care about me. Whereas they've got a hidden agenda in the sense of they probably just want to sleep with her, know what I mean, and for me that female usually ends up getting a name... whore, sket, dirty girl, smig... I've had her and don't want her cos I don't really respect her and the things she's done or the sexual acts she's carried out... they think these lads rate them, but they really don't from what I see"* (Participant K, 27 year old young man)

Where the young women involved frequently anticipated that 'linking up' with a gang-involved young man (or, as was often the case, several gang-involved young men) would be the route to achieving status and protection – and indeed were often led to believe this by the young men involved – this was very rarely the case. As many others highlighted, it was, at best, the route to short term gain and, more often than not, a route to considerable levels of exploitation and harm.

Young women in the role of 'link' were observed to be at particular risk of virtually all of the forms of sexual violence and exploitation outlined earlier in this chapter and often experienced many different forms. Like the other categories of young women outlined above, they were at risk of targeting by rival gangs. Unlike these other young women, however, they were equally at risk within their own gang environment with no level of protection afforded to them. As a group, they were the ones most likely to be viewed as having lost their right to assent to, or decline, sexual activity. They were also the ones most likely to be pressured into sexual activity with multiple individuals at the same time or, where pressure was not achieving the desired results, forcibly coerced into this.

Most interviewees (both male and female) spoke of young women in these situations in derogatory terms, with some participants' language bordering on contemptuous. Various labels applied to these young women were 'dirty girls', 'nasty girls', 'hoodrats', 'bitch', 'ting', 'jezes' and 'groupies', with terms such as 'loose', 'scatty' and 'easy' utilised when asked to describe what these girls were like. Some of the young men described these young women as dangerous and untrustworthy, noting with disdain that this 'type' of girl was the kind who would falsely claim rape or set you up with a rival gang:

*"They'll just use their sexuality to manipulate us... She could be planning to set me up or anything really. She could be planning anything. From when I was younger*

*my cousin used to say to me, rule number one you never bring a girl back to your house, you never ever bring a girl back to where your family sleep, so I never use to bring girls there. When I used to link girls... either I go back to her house if it's not in one of them areas, it happens in a park... From when I was younger people have been saying to me girls are just wicked"* (Participant B, 16 year old young man)

As illustrated in the following quotations, 'links' were also frequently manipulated into engaging in gang-related illegal activity. Furthermore, though never given meaningful access to the gang environment, their associations with others were forcibly controlled through threats and use of punishment should they be seen to associate with individuals from other gangs:

*"If she's seen speaking to someone from other side someone would have punched her up or whatever, not like killed her, not like stabbed her or anything... You can't affiliate with both sides. You can never just be neutral"* (Participant B, 16 year old young man)

*"They don't really like the girls chilling with them unless it's like they know they're going to need them, kind of thing. So you're just there to hold drugs, weapons, court papers, you know like just stuff what they need, phones for them, money... They manipulate them and get into their head and make them do stuff, like when they're holding drugs for them, they don't want to hold the drugs for them, they don't want to hold the guns for them because they know they're putting themselves at danger but he'll tell her 'Oh, I'm under pressure. I can't walk around with this because obviously I'm gonna get stopped, you're not. I love you. Come on, I protect you, you protect me. You won't get caught' blah, blah blah. They're saying that to you, they've dropped the drugs with you and then they're going to their real girlfriends house cos the real girlfriend knows she's not having that in her house. Yeah, because they're living with the real girlfriends, obviously, when their house gets raided, that's their address... A lot of guys will get money off other girls to go and get something for their girlfriend. This is how naïve some of the girls are. It's sad. It's really, really sad and I can see it so blatant cos obviously I'm not involved, them guys have respect for me, but I can see them just getting into people. It's really bad. It's older guys as well, with younger girls"* (Participant Z3, 18 year old young woman)

Of all the categories of young women, 'links' were without doubt those most likely to experience significant levels of risk, harm and blame, without any accompanying protections or lasting benefits. Yet, in spite of this, there appeared to be a steady stream of young women ending up in such a role. Participants identified a range of potential reasons for this including:

- Peer pressure;
- Social norms within the young woman's sphere of influence;
- An attempt to fill a void in their lives, with noticeable reference to absent fathers;
- Access to material goods;



- Desire for status or protection (although as noted above, the reality appeared to be otherwise for most); and
- Low self-esteem and self-worth.

### **'Out of area links'**

The one group of young women who were viewed as operating outside of these commonly cited motivations were those of 'out of area' girls, who were observed to be actively coming into gang-affected neighbourhoods and ending up in the role of 'link' across a number of different research sites:

*"I've had a friend [from an affluent area] at 16, she bought a car and she was driving round in the car without no insurance, no tax, but she wanted to be like one of the boys. A lot of guys, like she'd sleep with quite a few people... she'd been exploited in the sense she's had drugs and bullets in her house before... She spent most of her time chilling with gang members. She's been in positions where cars have driven past and they've pointed guns out the window, and she's had to run, following gang members... when he's been in jail she'd send him money, you know, go in to visit him, as much as she's done for him, he wasn't prepared to fall out with his mates within his gang for her... It can get to the stage that they're being exploited left, right and centre.... but if they're from an affluent area they've got no backing. They just have to put up and shut up" (Participant C, 23 year old young woman)*

Many participants, young women from the local area in particular, struggled to comprehend why anyone would choose to expose themselves to these issues when they had a choice to do otherwise; a choice that many local young women felt they did not have:

*"A lot of girls come from different areas to ask them, like why would you do that? They could have stayed at home. Why would you wanna come? [R: and why do you think they do want to come?] Because of the status, because of the name, the people and because they've got so much status, they think it's all like a game" (Participant T2, 21 year old young woman)*

*"But there's a lot of girls what come from out of the areas, like areas what don't have that much gangs in, for the gang members, do you know what I mean, cos they like that kinda guy. Like you see a lot of girls coming and getting like buses out of town, buses to here, like two buses to get here just to be around the guys and it's like 'What are you doing?' They're the girls who I don't have no respect for in that sense because I just think you're purposefully bringing yourself into this environment to be around these people... They'll sit there and they'll just wait for the guys to like talk to them and it's not even like they will just chill with them cos they'll get sexually involved with them and it's not nice. It's sad. It's very sad, but then again I don't think they know how much they're getting themselves involved when they do start, when they're coming down, cos I've seen girls get beat up, get like kicked in the face by guys because they're*

*chilling with certain people. Even though they've chose to chill with them and they like to be around them they didn't think that it's so serious because they're not from round here so they don't know what it's like, the effects, the consequences you can have.. Yeah, cos like they're getting pictures with them and like throw up gang signs with them and then it gets on Facebook and other people see them. Then they get caught in town by other gang members and they're like 'Ah, she chills with such and such a people' and then obviously they have to do something to them.... I don't think they know how serious it can get when they're doing it. Cos they've not grown up around it. The girls round here, they're involved but it's not a choice thing, but these other girls, they come here of their own free will but then they're not as clued up. They don't have as much knowledge as people from round here would know if you get involved with them then this is what's gonna happen" (Participant Z3, 18 year old young woman)*

As illustrated in the quotations above, many participants had very mixed responses to 'out of area girls'. On the one hand, they were very critical of them for exposing themselves to such risk and harm when they could more easily have avoided it. On the other, however, they recognised that, not having grown up in the area, these young women may not have comprehended what they were letting themselves in for and naively found themselves caught up in a situation that they found hard to escape.

## **3.7 Forms of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation against young men**

Although the vast majority of identified incidents of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation were perpetrated against females by males, this does not negate the potential for concurrent risk for young men. Indeed, although the majority of discourse about young men's victimisation within gangs related to physical violence, around one quarter of participants did indicate knowledge of young men being victims of some form of sexual violence or exploitation within that context.

In contrast to the incidents of sexual violence or exploitation identified against young women, the incidents involving male victims were generally identified by third parties, rather than those to whom it had happened – the notable exceptions to this were young men who presented themselves as victims of young women targeting them for their status (see section 3.7.2) and those who identified themselves as having felt pressured into engaging in sexual activity against their will in group-based scenarios. Also in contrast to participants' discourse about young women's experiences, incidents of sexual violence towards, or exploitation of, young males were rarely identified without specific prompting by the researcher – when they asked the participant to think about whether the types of things they had freely identified in relation to young women, ever happened to young men.

### 3.7.1 Rape and other sexual assaults

Incidents of rape or sexual assault of young men were generally presented as discrete incidents, with a clear gang-related motivation, rather than indicative of a wider social phenomenon of sexual violence against young males. The incidents identified included cases of rape, forced stripping and non-consensual recording of sexual activity, used both as a means of initiation into a gang and as a means of humiliating a rival gang member:

*"I have seen videos of where a group of guys ordered other boys to strip and then take their clothes and make them say stuff into the camera, and just leave them there, or told them they've got to walk home like that"* (Participant W, 21 year old young woman)

*"I've seen some where boys are rapping in the foreground and girls doing something sexual in the background. It's mostly girls, but boys are in the videos being made to do stuff too"* (Participant H3, 21 year old young man)

*"That's another way of setting up a boy. They could take photos of him doing stuff like licking a girl or have oral sex but with younger people, like boys shouldn't be doing that, having oral sex with girls because it's just, it's not right... But if they do do it, they will try and keep it secret and not tell anyone as well, but some girls will like bait them – or taking pictures and then showing everyone"* (Participant O, 16 year old young man)

*"I don't know what they was thinking, but they forced a boy to give them oral sex and they raped him... I was thinking, why did you do that... and everyone in the whole area was like 'what are you doing' and now they're outcasts. And some of them have big names... No matter how bad you are, that's not a thing that people thingy with"* (Participant M2, 21 year old young man)

The way respondents portrayed these, and most other, incidents of sexual violence against young men were more as acts of humiliation and control rather than sexual acts. Where perceived to be otherwise, particularly in cases of rape, participants expressed abhorrence and/or condemnation of the act, because of perceived associations with homosexuality that was deemed to be unacceptable within the hyper-masculine culture of the gang:

*"A guy on guy? What like, a gang member rape another guy. No that doesn't go down... That's disgusting, stab them both up, stab them both up"* (Participant F2, 21 year old young man)

Such a response held serious implications for a young man's propensity to report such an experience:

*"Obviously if it happened to a person they'd be too embarrassed to say this happened to me... Cos like if a boy got assaulted by another boy like, obviously sexually, he would never report it cos he'd be like, obviously you're always gonna be labelled as like a*

*homosexual... you might feel sorry for him yeah, but you'd think like how didn't you defend yourself, you're supposed to be a man... So it's not worth it, they'd just keep it to themselves."* (Participant N2, 19 year old young man)

### 3.7.2 Targeted for status

A number of young men identified themselves as victims of sexual exploitation with reference to young women targeting them for sex or relationships solely because of what they could offer the young woman in return. They referred to young women as 'fame cats' or 'fans' actively pursuing young men because of their status; using their sexuality to manipulate them into having a relationship with them and deriving the benefits from this without any regard to the young man involved:

*"But you can never tell, you can't tell if a girl loves you cos she loves you or she loves you because of your status"* (Participant B, 16 year old young man)

*"If you're having sex with a certain gang member then you take on his respect, so people won't talk to you normally or bad mouth you... That's all it is these days. It's all about title. Your title will get you a girl. If you've got respect out on the roads, girls will respect you and want to be with you and have sex with you. They'll want to be linking this person... regardless of personality or looks of anything like that, if you've got money and respect, you've got girls... they get the title, the money, presents, clothes, gifts... but she doesn't care about the relationship itself. It's all about how it benefits her... financially, what she's able to do, where she's able to go"* (Participant U2, 20 year old young man)

*"Cos I was like the main one when she was with me and I kinda broke off from it.... his name started becoming the main one and she started going out with him instead... but then his name started going more quieter and people weren't talking about him and she jumped sides. She dumped him and she started going out with a guy from the opposite gang... but then he got arrested for five years and then she switched back over and started going out with another guy"* (Participant N, 24 year old young man)

Young men's discourse around this presents an interesting adjunct to that previously presented in section 3.5.5, where participants conceptualised young women as victims in such scenarios. It is of course impossible for an outsider to determine the balance between victim and exploiter in such scenarios without knowing the intricacies of the individual situation and the wider contextual factors at play. It is however important to recognise the potential for concurrent victimhood and exploitation within such situations, where both parties are victims of the wider structures within which they function.

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15 'Beat' = having sex with

### 3.7.3 Pressure to engage in sexual activity

The other key form of sexual violence and exploitation identified in relation to male victims, indeed the one that was most frequently identified within the research, was that of pressure or coercion to engage in group-based sexual activity. Whilst not denying the victimhood of young women in such situations, a number of participants (both male and female) recognised that young men may not always be entirely willing participants in situations of sexual violence and that sometimes they may be participating in behaviours with which they are uncomfortable due to fear and/or peer expectations:

*"I've done it to kids before, I've been saying 'go in there, what's up with him, here's a girl', you know what I'm saying, 'I'm finished so you can go in' and he's like 'I'll go in there in a minute' and then you notice 'em, like you can see in their eyes that they don't want to go in ... when I first like beat<sup>15</sup> a girl and that, I got like not peer pressure but it was like, that was, that was how I ever lost mine innit like"* (Participant N2, 16 year old young man)

*"[Some] know it's wrong, they'd be too scared to say. Some of them will sit there and watch another man taking advantage of a girl and not say anything, even if he's got a daughter or sister somewhere, he wouldn't say because he's scared of that person or he's got a certain reputation to keep up"* (Participant H, 24 year old young woman)

*"She don't want one person to have sex with her, she wants two, so for me to get my sex, you're getting your sex even if you like it or not"* (Participant F3, 21 year old young man)

*"One of them told me that he couldn't actually go through with it because the girl was crying and he didn't wanna see that... But sometimes you have to do it. If you're a boy you have to do it because if the guys see that you don't wanna do it, that you're scared or something, they'll use that against you. Yeah, he felt pressured"* (Participant J, 16 year old young woman)

*"I wouldn't say they're forced, but they're kind of egged on. Does that make sense? It's not like they're sat with a gun telling them 'you must do this' but if you're a member of a gang you've got to do it. They're not going to say 'no' cos you're going to be the pussy of the gang, and because you're involved with that environment, you think fuck it and just do it... I don't think it'll be so much them being forced, but I think, what's the word where you're pressured? You know when you're kind of pressured into doing these things. Peer pressure. That's just ultimately what it is"* (Participant C, 23 year old young woman)

Applying the lens of free and informed choice previously outlined in section 3.5.3 with reference to young women's experiences of group-based sexual experiences, similar questions must be asked about whether young men, in situations such as those outlined above, felt that declining sexual activity was actually a valid option for them, given the pressures to conform with the norms of gang life.

## 3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the various forms of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation identified by participants in the research. Whilst not saying that such incidents occur to the same degree, or in the same way, across all gang environments, it is clear from participants' contributions that they were certainly not atypical of their and their peers' experiences of such environments. A number of common themes underpin much of the discourse presented in this and the previous chapter:

- Changing norms of sexual behaviour between, and sexual violence experienced by, young people;
- What is perceived as permissive in conflict-driven patriarchal environments;
- Normality of coercion and control;
- Sex as a form of violence;
- Sex as a means of achieving or maintaining social capital;
- The tenuous nature of perceived protections associated with this;
- The relationship between risk and role;
- The potential for male victimhood; and
- The consequences of daring to challenge social norms and expectations.

The chapter has identified both forms of sexual violence and exploitation that are unique to gangs and those that transcend other peer-on-peer scenarios, but are uniquely experienced within the gang environment. It has considered the ways in which a young woman's status can affect her exposure to, and protection from, sexual violence and exploitation but done so with recognition of the tenuous nature of any such protections and the ways in which access to this is mediated through, and controlled by, young men. It has also explored the potential for sexual victimisation of young males, including the complexity of the victim-perpetrator dynamic in situations of peer-on-peer abuse, particularly those occurring within such a hierarchical and group-dominated environment. Bearing all this in mind, Chapter Four proceeds to an exploration of current responses to the issues explored within this Chapter.



# Chapter 4: Responding to gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation

## Key messages

1. Incidents of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are rarely reported. There are a variety of reasons for this including:
  - resignation to, or normalisation of, these experiences;
  - fear of judgement by others;
  - fear of retribution or retaliation; and
  - a lack of confidence in services' ability to protect victims.
2. Young people's reluctance to disclose and seek support makes identification of concerns by professionals particularly pertinent, but the overall consensus is that cases of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are not yet being proactively identified by professional services.
3. Although there are many promising examples of work within both the gangs and sexual violence/exploitation field, service responses that integrate these traditionally discrete fields of work are still in the early phases of development.
4. Whilst some examples of good practice exist when cases reach statutory thresholds, both preventative and early intervention initiatives are currently under-developed. Similarly, so too are longer-term support services for recovery and exit.
5. Inadequate inter-agency working, and information sharing, across the gangs and sexual exploitation/sexual violence fields is one of the key factors conspiring against a more effective response to this issue. This needs to be addressed at both a strategic and operational level.
6. On a more positive note, the conduct of the research did reveal openness on the part of many professionals to learning more about gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation and how to better respond to this.

## 4.1 Introduction

Having considered the forms of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation identified within the research, and the wider context within which these occur, this chapter offers a cross-site synopsis of current responses to the issue. It begins with a consideration of young people's responses to the issue, exploring in particular

why they may be reluctant to report their experiences and access support from services. Proceeding from a recognition that young people rarely disclose and seek support, the chapter provides a cross-site analysis of how services currently engage, and could potentially better engage, with this issue.

The data presented in this chapter is drawn from both the individual interview phase of the study and the focus groups that were subsequently conducted with professionals and young people. These focus groups were conducted with the specific purpose of considering the effectiveness of current responses to the issue (in light of preliminary research findings) and identifying what a more effective response might look like.

The professional focus groups did not provide as much data in relation to the issue of responding as anticipated and this has inevitably impacted upon what can be presented within this chapter. There appeared to be a number of different reasons for this across the different sites including:

- Inadequate existing knowledge and data as to the nature and extent of the issue;
- The relative infancy of identification and acknowledgment of the issue of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation in many sites. This meant that much of the commentary was focused on identifying gaps in existing practice, with relatively little focused on what has been evidenced as working well in response to these – although it should be noted that participants were very keen to learn about this;
- Silo working: whilst participants could talk about what they were doing within their own practice, not all could locate this practice within wider structures of response; and
- Variable awareness and understanding of the issue amongst some focus group participants: although having a professional responsibility for these issues, for some participants in some areas, the presentation of the findings appeared to be their first real introduction to these issues.

These issues, together with the need to maintain the anonymity of the research sites, means that the commentary that follows in sections 4.3 to 4.6 is restricted to a high-level analysis of what might be required to deliver an effective multi-agency response to this issue as opposed to a detailed exploration of what is, and is not, working well at the operational level. We would, however, direct the reader to the final report of the OCC CSEGG Inquiry for a complementary analysis of responses to this issue (OCC 2013).



## 4.2 Young people's responses to gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation

Three overarching themes emerge from a consideration of how young people respond to the issue of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation, as articulated by both professionals and young people themselves:

- Confusion about what actually constitutes sexual violence or exploitation;
- The acceptance of sexual violence and exploitation as a 'normal' part of life in their social milieu and a resignation to this; and
- Low levels of reporting and seeking support from professionals.

These issues are not of course unique to the gang environment – studies of sexual violence or exploitation in other settings repeatedly identify similar concerns (see section 1.4) – but, as with the actual incidents of sexual violence and exploitation identified in the previous chapter, the consensus across participants (both professionals and young people) was that they were differentially experienced within this setting.

Participants' confusion about what actually constitutes sexual violence or exploitation – compounded by a lack of understanding of consent and coercion within this – has already been illustrated at various stages throughout this report and, as such, will not be repeated here. What has not yet been fully considered, however, is the degree to which young people resist or resign themselves to the harmful experiences outlined in the previous two chapters, and the implications that this has for their propensity to report and seek support. This is now explored.

### 4.2.1 Resignation to sexual violence and exploitation

Asked to consider why young people might not report incidents of sexual violence or exploitation, participants indicated that this was likely, in large part, due to the normalisation of, and resignation to, such experiences within the gang environment:

*"I'm used to it... It's normal... It's wrong, but you get used to it... Welcome to our generation" (young woman's response to findings in young person's focus group A)*

*"They know it's wrong, and they know it shouldn't happen, but this is what it's like round here – [young women think] 'this is how I have to survive, this is what happens. This is my world and I can't change it'... And the young men have normalised it too... and they will continue to rape because they don't understand that what they have done is wrong" (professional focus group C)<sup>16</sup>*

*"It's so normalised that a lot of young people are 'why bother reporting it', 'it's our choice, it's our body' and 'who's going to believe us' and 'who cares'... I think it's about friendships and loyalties and that normalisation.*

*A lot of schools and charities that I'm speaking to are like 'how do we break this, how do we change this whole culture of how young people perceive their relationships'" (professional focus group A)*

This sense of resignation was particularly evident where the abuse occurred as a result of inter-gang rivalry or in the context of known relationships (coerced sexual activity with 'links' or girlfriends, for example). Interestingly, and alarmingly, there was very little sense amongst young people (and some professionals also) that anything could be done to change this apparent normalisation of sexual violence and exploitation within the gang environment. Many young women, in particular, expressed this view; consequently adopting a 'these things happen, pick yourself up and get on with it' attitude (Participant X). As this young woman, whose commentary strongly indicated personal experience of sexual violence, went on to conclude; in her opinion, there were only three viable options available to individuals such as her: (i) move out of the area, (ii) get involved in another gang for protection or (iii) wait it out:

*"Sit there and let them do what they're doing to you and one day they'll give up. They'll always find another target. They won't pick on you the rest of your life, there's always other targets coming along that catch their attention. They'll get bored of you one time" (Participant X, 22 year old young woman)*

The responses of young women who had been victimised in this way, or had witnessed such victimisation were, for the most part, fatalistic. The accompanying absence of any discourse about challenging the assumption that these things will happen, or seeking external support when they do, presents serious challenges for those endeavouring to prevent and respond to these forms of victimisation.

### 4.2.2 Low levels of reporting

Only 1 in 12 interviewees felt that young people would be likely to report, or talk about, experiences of sexual violence or exploitation. Even those who did think that a young person might talk to someone rarely indicated that this would take the form of a formal disclosure, with two-thirds stating that the individual a young person would most likely talk to would be a peer.

Participants across both the interview and focus group phases of the research identified a range of potential explanations for the low levels of reporting observed across the research. Beyond that of resignation to the existence of such experiences considered above, these included (i) judgement by others, (ii) fear of retaliation and (iii) a lack of faith in services' ability to protect them.

<sup>16</sup> The recording mechanisms used in professional focus groups means we are unable to match contributions to individual participants or note their professional background

## Judgement by others

As previously highlighted in Chapters Two and Three, victims of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation experienced very different reactions depending on both their gender and whether they were perceived to be a 'deserving' or 'undeserving' victim. This is not of course unique to the gang environment, but the implications of this meant that many young people were reluctant to disclose experience of sexual victimisation for fear that they would be disbelieved and/or judged for their perceived part in this. On the basis that three-quarters of interview participants indicated differing degrees of empathy depending on their perception of the victim, this would appear to be a well-founded fear:

*"In terms of barriers to reporting these incidents... we ask the girls in the session 'why would you not report something' and it's often 'because I'm going to be called a slag', 'I'll lose all my friends, all the girls will find out and they won't want to be my friend anymore' and often it's the girls that end up having to move schools because they're the ones being bullied by other girls. So there's no sisterhood. There's no empathy. That's the concern; there's no empathy. No-one's going to believe me. No-one's going to care. The girls are going to bully me and the boys are going to think that they can do it to me again"* (professional focus group D)

For many young people, this fear of external judgement was compounded by the fact that, due to lack of understanding of consent and/or other people's reactions, they were also questioning whether they had been in any way to blame. This self-blame acted as a further deterrent against reporting incidents or seeking support, with many young people in this position failing to see that they had been wronged and/or feeling that they were undeserving of support:

*"I think the main problem with like rape. For so long it's been portrayed as like in a way the woman's fault, because you were dressing provocatively. Oh you were drunk... and I think if a woman gets really drunk and that ends up happening, I think a lot of girls kind of blame themselves, like oh I was really drunk, blah, blah, blah, but they don't see what's actually happened, and they don't see that the guy is in the wrong. They kind of blame themselves for it."* (Participant T, 21 year old young woman)

*"She'll be scared, they will make her not even wanna speak again, she probably would never speak again she'll be that scared, she wouldn't be able to tell no-one, it will be that bad. She wouldn't know how to explain so... She wouldn't be who she used to be... and she would feel responsible because she took that step by trying to hang with different gang members so she'll feel responsible, she will feel like the punishment is right, she'll feel like that's meant to happen"* (Participant G3, 15 year old young woman)

## Fear of retaliation should they report

Fear of retribution from the gang was also a very effective silencing mechanism when it came to reporting

gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation. Whilst this is no means unique to the gang environment, the general consensus was that the risks were significantly higher both in terms of the likelihood of retribution and the severity of the forms this might take. Young people were very conscious of the potential implications of being seen to 'snitch' or 'grass' and the fact that even if the person who originally offended against you was apprehended, there were many others who could enact revenge on their behalf:

*"Let me give you an example of why people don't [go to the police]. Because if you go to the police station and say 'this gang member raped me' that gang member might be found guilty and go to jail, but remember he's part of a gang. So all the ones in the gang, 500 people, 400 people, will come back to you, to your house. Could go to your family's house, you know. So you might as well keep it on the low and move on with your life innit... If you go to the police, that's the wrong move. That's the worst thing a person could do... It'll come back cos with gangsters they got to win innit. They never give up"* (Participant D, 17 year old young woman)

*"So they're also aware of the extent of where this issue can go and I think that's the major problem because if we're part of a group of 30 and I've been disrespected by five or six of them, I may report it and go to the appropriate people who have to then do what they need to do which is question, lock up, whatever they need to do, but I then have to still go into the same school, living in the same house and being intimidated, myself, my brother, my whole family. I think that's the bigger barrier to the whole issue"* (professional focus group F)

As illustrated in the quotations above, this fear of retribution related not only to what might happen to an individual personally, but also what might happen to others within their familial or social circle. This fear is greatly complicated by the fact that perpetrators and victims of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation generally reside within the same community, with perpetrators and their associates consequently aware not only of how to locate a victim, but also how to find and target their families and others within their immediate social circle. The power of such fear is also reinforced by young people's knowledge of other situations in which such threats have been realised and significant harm consequently caused.

## Lack of faith in services' ability to protect them

These concerns about potential retaliation from gang members were frequently compounded by an accompanying concern that statutory services could not adequately protect them from this, if they did choose to disclose. This belief stemmed primarily from reported previous experiences of contact with services, either on the part of the young person themselves or others they knew. These experiences had led them to believe that little would change for the better if they reported their concerns. Three particular issues were identified within this:

- Negative perceptions of the police;
- An absence of convictions in similar cases; and
- The need for long-term protection and support.

#### Perceptions of police

Many participants expressed a deep suspicion and dislike of the police, usually rooted in what they described as negative experiences of policing within their community:

*"If a person's got something wrong and the police go the house or something, it's never like okay you're the victim here, it's like you must have done something to provoke the situation. I've been there, I've seen it. That's why people don't really wanna go to the police nowadays because they're not really helpful"* (Participant X, 21 year old young woman)

*"We don't believe that police are there to help us.... When I've seen my dad get arrested the police was hard on him, grips him up and push his hands behind his back and that, and it's not like he's resisting, they had him on the floor outside. There's no need for that. I've seen police taser people and I've been hit on my leg with a kosh, it's not necessary"* (Participant B, 16 year old young man)

Whilst recognising that things were beginning to change in some areas – *"there are some that are nice, build relationships with people round here"* (Participant X) – previous experiences and perceptions still held significant sway. Police were consequently more often viewed as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution in some communities and as such there remained a strong resistance to engaging with them.

#### Absence of convictions

Young people's reluctance to report incidents of sexual violence or exploitation to the authorities also stemmed from a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system more generally. A number of young people shared examples of cases that had been reported to the authorities and, in their opinion, failed to be appropriately acted upon. As noted in the examples below, young people could potentially end up at greater risk as a result of this:

*"They don't concentrate on serious things. I got raped and when I finally spoke to the police about it they let him on bail and he came looking for me – why do they do that?"* (Participant Y, 17 year old young woman)

*"Like one of my friends, she got raped and she went to court and everything and the lad got let off and there was so much evidence... and now she is out there knowing that she's going to bump into this lad. So there's no point in going to the police even if it's true, the police won't lock up the person. They'll lock people up over drugs and little silly things when there's rapists and people out there and they're not doing nothing... Like one of my other friends as well, she's going through a court case at the moment with an attempt rape, and the lad is out on bail and she's shit scared. She won't leave her house or anything."*

*She's scared she'll bump into him, and then like my ex-boyfriend, he got remanded for selling drugs, which selling drugs compared to attempt rape, there's so much difference... Like it does confuse you sometimes when you look at like the seriousness between them both is completely different"* (Participant E2, 17 year old young woman)

*"Coz obviously when it comes to the authorities really, they're just a waste of space if you ask me... Let's just say if a girl got raped and then obviously she's told the authorities and she's told the authorities who the person is. Let's just say they brought them to court, nothing happens to the person, then that is also putting the girl in even more danger, because if it was actually true and he did that and then he's just getting away with it, who's to say that he can't do it again, and just get away with it... That's when people take matters into their own hands and then obviously, then you'd be looked on as the bad person, where really the authorities and obviously the people that are meant to be doing these kind of jobs are not doing their jobs"* (Participant P2, 18 year old young woman)

As illustrated in the final quotation above, this lack of confidence in the ability of the criminal justice system to deliver justice led some young people to conclude that, if they wanted something done about an incident of sexual offending, they should seek alternative solutions within their own community.

This lack of confidence in the ability of services to effectively protect victims, and deliver satisfactory outcomes should issues be reported, was also shared by many professionals:

*"Participant A: The problem is that they know the system and the system's not actually particularly well set up. Certainly the criminal justice system doesn't protect victims. They know if they tell somebody, they know about information sharing, they know who's going to be made aware... that they'll be referred to social services and their parents might find out"*

*Participant B: But what's in it for them? What's going to get better if they do that*

*Participant A: And actually, it's a massive risk*

*Participant C: They're looking for the quick fix and we don't do quick fixes"* (professional focus group C)

#### Long term support and protection

The other key concern associated with reluctance to report, identified by both young people and professionals, was that of the need for, and the difficulty accessing, long-term support and protection. As both professionals and young people recognised, risk did not necessarily reduce with time given the co-location of the victim and perpetrator within the same community and the centrality of revenge within the gang ethos:

*"Then the reality of that is that they may get immediate support from the authorities... but what about the one year, two year legacy after they've reported it and that support has gone away and"*



*they're then left within the same community that they're living in, having to face the people who they've reported on. That's a bit of a reality check for young people reporting it because they know that and they're the one who's got to live that experience... And even if that individual is taken out of the community, what happens is their family gets disrespected in the community... the support you get isn't enough for you, to see right through... It feels like a lot of the services are crisis focused"* (professional focus group F)

*"A lot of people that snitch, like they will get found out and when they get found out something will happen and even if you say something like to the police and they don't mention your name, they'll probably find out and then in a couple years time, like the police can't protect ya all your lives. Some people hold grudges for so long so they'll get you back"* (young person's focus group).

The difficulties of providing this long term support, and the various elements required within it, are explored below.

### 4.3 Overview of current service responses

The overall sense emerging from both professionals and young people who participated in the study is that of a system that is still in the early stages of development in terms of how it prevents, identifies and responds to gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation. Whilst acknowledging that some discrete examples of promising practice existed across the six research sites (see relevant sections below) the overall assessment of professional engagement with this issue was that it was still primarily reactive, as opposed to proactive and preventative, when it comes to this particular issue:

*"I think that's the crux across the board – the funding that goes into prevention – mentors, youth workers, support workers – is pathetic compared to what goes on in terms of dealing with the consequences"* (professional focus group J)

Although there was an apparent willingness across a range of professional fields to learn more about the issue and how to better engage with it, there were a number of common factors repeatedly identified as conspiring against both the effective identification of, and an effective response to, the issue of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation. These factors were noted to operate at an individual, community and systemic level and, further to the issues outlined above as influencing young people's responses to the issue, included:

- A lack of information flow to and from many gang-affected neighbourhoods and a historical lack of integration between community-based and statutory-based initiatives attempting to tackle issues within the community;
- Insufficient awareness of the issue amongst professionals;

- Silo working across different agencies and strands of work (child protection and gangs initiatives, for example) and a lack of knowledge of how one's practice fits within wider relevant strategies and operational initiatives;
- A consequent lack of information-sharing between agencies;
- Inadequate partnership-working and cross-fertilisation of learning between gangs and sexual exploitation/sexual violence initiatives. As such there remains:
  - o A primary focus on young men and male-on-male physical violence within gangs work and a frequent neglect of female and/or sexually based gang victimisation;
  - o Inadequate engagement with the risks young men and young women experience within the gang environment within the child sexual exploitation field;
- Lack of clarity as to the best policy fit for these issues: is it best conceptualised and responded to as child sexual exploitation, domestic violence, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and/or serious youth violence? (see *Firmin 2013*);
- Short-term funding initiatives and the need to reframe service provision according to shifting funding priorities; and
- Inadequate data collection and data monitoring.

These issues were observed to impact upon all aspects of service provision across the different research sites. Their particular manifestation within different elements of the system, and participants' perspectives on what should be done about this, are presented in turn below, beginning with a consideration of identification.

### 4.4 Identification

Given the infrequency with which experiences of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are self-disclosed by victims or perpetrators, the issue of professional identification is particularly pertinent. Yet both the conduct and findings of this study indicated inadequate awareness and acknowledgment of the risks of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation amongst many different professionals.

Gangs initiatives (both statutory and voluntary) were often failing to adequately recognise, let alone address, the needs of young women who are associated with gangs. Although some services are beginning to engage in work with young women, many others appear to continue to operate on the assumption that only young men are at risk of being associated with, and victimised by, gangs – and that this victimisation only takes physical forms. Whilst many are doing very good work in this regard, they are not currently resourced or equipped to engage in gender-sensitive work with young women around the risks associated with gangs. Nor indeed are they equipped to deal with risks of sexual victimisation relating to young men.



Cases of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation do not always appear to be picked up by sexual exploitation services either, with many observing that only a very small number of their clients fitted this profile despite the fact that these issues were occurring within their locale. Whilst some are being picked up by other forms of service (VAWG projects, youth offending teams or school nursing for example), it would appear that many more cases – of both young men and young women – are not yet being picked up by any form of service provision.

Even where risks may be being picked up, these are not being systemically recorded or monitored. As highlighted previously in Chapter Three, the response to a data request issued to the local sites revealed that they were unable to provide any figures as to the extent of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation within their locale on the basis of their existing data collection systems. Whilst data may be being collated on gangs, and similarly on sexual exploitation, there is little read-across between these databases. This has inevitable repercussions for establishing both baseline and ongoing prevalence data, which in turn has implications for resourcing decisions and the systemic responses that will be put in place.

The issues about inadequate identification and monitoring of young people experiencing, or at risk of, gang-associated sexual exploitation and violence identified within this study do not appear to be unique to the research sites included in this piece of work. They align with the findings of the wider OCC Inquiry which found that:

- Only 37 out of 146 Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) were collecting data on young people believed to be experiencing, or at risk of, child sexual exploitation involving gangs.
- Only three LSCBs provided specific local training to professionals on identifying such young people (a further 110 said that they delivered training which covered all types of child sexual exploitation, the degree to which risk associated with gangs is covered within this is unclear); and
- Less than half of the 21 police forces that identified criminally active gangs in their force area have mapped (n=2), or were in the process of mapping (n=8), females who were associated with gang members (OCC 2013).

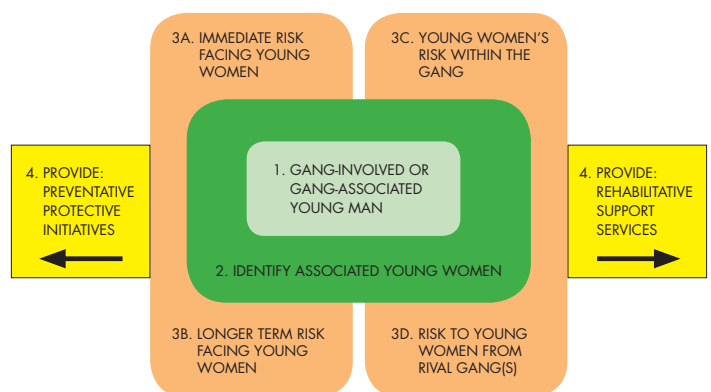
Specifically considering developments in the Ending Gang Violence areas,<sup>17</sup> the Inquiry similarly found a lack of read-across between sexual exploitation and gangs strategies and responses. It found that:

- Only 9 LSCBs were collecting distinguishable prevalence data on gang-associated child sexual exploitation;
- Only 7 LSCBs mentioned gang membership as an indicator which it considers and seeks to collate data

around to identify victims of child sexual exploitation; and

- Only two of the 11 LSCBs who have produced a child sexual exploitation strategy, have linked this to their local gangs strategy (OCC 2013).

Recognising the very real risks for young women associated with gang-involved males (of a sexual nature and beyond), professionals acknowledged that good practice would involve regular mapping of, and preventative engagement with, associated young women where any young man is identified as gang-involved. Consideration of the risk posed to these young women should span both risk within the gang and that associated with rival gangs, and both immediate and longer-term risk (see Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1: Mapping risk for females associated with gangs or gang-involved males**

Professionals also indicated that good practice in terms of identification of initial concerns would also involve capacity building across a range of professionals to increase the likelihood of concerns being picked up wherever a young person – male or female – comes into contact with the system, and to ensure professionals know where to signpost for further support when concerns are identified:

*“The lesson we need to learn is how we can signpost people to get help and support. We can’t have people walking around not knowing who to turn to and what to do. That’s the biggest lesson to learn isn’t it; that there needs to be somebody” (professional focus group F)*

## 4.5 Responding to identified concerns

These improvements in identification are of course only one element of a holistic response to gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation. Participants recognised

17 Data is based on a review of 32 of the 33 Ending Gang Violence Areas

that for these to make any significant difference they must be accompanied by a robust package of gender-proofed diversionary, early intervention, rehabilitative and exiting initiatives that can be drawn upon when potential risks are identified.

These interventions need to recognise both the complexity of situations of sexual violence and exploitation, and the added complexities of these occurring within a gang environment. Unfortunately, the overall consensus across the six research sites was that, whilst some such initiatives existed (see relevant sections below), they were few and far between and certainly not part of a planned inter-agency systemic response as should be the case.

#### 4.5.1 Early intervention

The area of early intervention was highlighted as particularly problematic across the different research sites, with diversionary and early intervention initiatives identified as both under-developed and under-resourced:

*"A: There needs to be something that comes earlier, because while we work with at risk young people you're fire-fighting with a certain number and actually that group work, if it was done early, would reduce the need for that long-term intervention"*

*B: Because when you have early intervention in place that's where you're going to pick up the indicators before it gets to this stage of where you're talking about. However there is something missing in terms of that, because we're all here from different organisations but we're not connected and able to tap into that resource"* (professional focus group C)

This dearth of early-intervention initiatives was a source of great frustration for many professionals who highlighted ongoing difficulties in accessing support in the absence of a firm disclosure or conviction. This was a particular issue of contention across many of the sites with regard to accessing support for young men at risk of perpetrating sexual offences:

*"I know several young people who I've tried to refer to get support because they are potential perpetrators and displaying sexualised behaviour to a concerning level. There's nowhere to send them. They don't meet the threshold for social care. Technically they haven't committed a crime, so I can't send them to the police. Where do you send them? There's no support"* (professional focus group D)

*"There isn't a clear cut support service. It's not sexual exploitation in a way that we could pick up. Unless they've broken the law, the Youth Offending Service can't deliver that work. And that unfortunately is when you start having this kind of like 'if only they'd break the law, then they could get all the support'"* (professional focus group I)

#### 4.5.2 Support services for victims of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation

Whilst acknowledging the need for further development within this field – particularly in relation to long-term support and criminal justice processes – participants did identify a number of examples of what they viewed to be good practice in terms of the provision of support for victims whose experiences came to the attention of services. These included:

- Inter-agency assessment of risk;
- A partnership approach to the delivery of support and safety planning;
- Access to specialist sexual exploitation or VAWG services and the provision of therapeutic and other forms of support within these;
- The development of Sexual Assault Referral Centres in some areas; and
- Engagement of housing services where a victim requires geographical relocation.

Whilst these examples are indeed encouraging, the issue lies in the fact that they are neither universally accessible nor consistently located within a wider, proactive, systemic response. Increasingly limited funding provision, and increasing moves towards time-limited programmes of work as a result of this, were also identified as posing challenges to the ongoing effectiveness of such initiatives. Both professionals and young people lamented the impact of financial cuts on the provision of services, both in terms of which services remained and decreasing capacity to engage in any long-term supportive work, noting that long-term core funding was a key to any sustainable response to these issues:

*"When you're dependent on being funded, you have to play to the tune of those that provide the funding and if you're not hitting that the funding could stop. And then the other point; young people don't understand the fact that things are commissioned or funded for a set period of time and it is that, literally that sheer cliff drop isn't it – this week we're running; next week we're not running ever again because our funding's finished"* (professional focus group E)

*"Without funding it's not gonna change. It's not gonna change. It's a waste of time. They can have these debates but there's no money to fund changes"* (young people's focus group D)

*"There were things like Connexions all over the place, and a lot of youth clubs but there's just not as many as there used to be. The funding's been cut and most of them have been closed, so I don't know where they would go. I don't even know where someone that had been sexually abused or raped or anything like that would actually go other than the police"* (Participant D2, 21 year old young man)

The impact of such cuts further compounds one of the other key issues raised by young people and professionals alike in relation to effective support for victims; that of the need to facilitate the development

of open and trusting relationships and the difficulties of doing so in the absence of time and consistent personnel:

*"If you build relationships with individuals they will talk to you about their problems, as far as I'm concerned... and if one has a positive outcome from that, they will talk to their friends and their friends might say 'right, that's the person I will go to if I've got this issue... It's getting away from the concept of reporting, because it's not reporting. It's a process through a relationship where you meet people over a period of time and they will incrementally tell a little bit more to one trusted person, whilst being able to retain some control over their information and what happens" (professional focus group B)*

Young people also spoke a lot about the importance of both individual people's reactions and system responses when they did begin to disclose and the importance of their needs being prioritised within this:

*"My social worker, yeah, when I had sommat to tell her, she wouldn't listen. She'd just keep going on and on about what she thought... Sometimes you're in that situation when they think it's all about what they're saying, like you don't get a word in edgeways. They've gotta think about how you actually feel telling someone about sommat serious an that" (young people's focus group B)*

*"Another thing, let's say I'm the young person, I tell you something, yes I know you have to go tell your supervisor and everything, but let's say, they call it the case, the case gets passed on to different services. I think the key worker that was initially there should remain in contact with that young person so she doesn't feel like she's just told that person something, they've told someone else and now they've moved on (Participant S2, 18 year old young man)*

A particular issue raised in relation to this was that of remaining present with the young people whilst they disclosed their experiences. Whilst recognising that professionals had a statutory duty to report disclosures, young people who had experiences of making disclosures urged professionals to recognise not only the significance of the disclosure itself, but the significance for the young person of having divulged this, and to 'sit with' the young person for a time while they processed what had just happened, and what would now, occur.

#### **4.5.3 Responding to perpetrators of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation**

As previously highlighted in section 4.2.2, the apparent lack of consequences for young people who perpetrated sexual violence or exploitation was an issue of serious concern for many young people within the study, particularly those who had experienced or knew someone who had experienced such victimisation. Professionals also expressed frustration with current responses to perpetrators of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation, both in terms of the challenges

of accessing early intervention services (as highlighted above) and in terms of the challenges associated with progressing cases through the justice system when behaviours reached the point of offending, although little detail was offered as to what potential solutions to this might be.

Interestingly, a lot of participants' discourse about potential responses to young men (many of whom were identified as perpetrating sexual violence within the gang environment; some of whom were identified as being victimised through it) focused more on helping them to exit that environment, than it did on responding to the sexual offending. Their contributions in this regard are explored in section 4.5.4 below, but the lack of engagement with this aspect of their experiences is something that warrants further attention.

#### **4.5.4 Supporting young people to exit the gang environment**

Supporting young people to exit the gang environment was the area in which participants (both young people and professionals) offered the most detailed commentary as to both what they perceived to be currently working and what additional measures they believed were required to ensure a more effective response. Many young people spoke positively of the role of youth mentors in helping young people to exit the gang environment (and indeed in diverting at risk young people away from this):

*"I think one of the biggest things is mentoring... Not just any mentor from anywhere, but one that's from your community, that you've kinda heard their reputation before... I think that's one of the biggest impacts" (young people's focus group D)*

*"I think there's lots of good practice out there that gives people the support, the information to go 'yeah' but you don't provide the long-term relational stuff because it's all about resources. So where are the groups or individuals who could take on these young people for one, two year stretches and actually see them through the whole thing of stopping the gang and get them out the other side and into something worthwhile and positive" (professional focus group C)*

Many professionals were also supportive of the role that could be played by mentors, so long as they were appropriately trained and supported and the programmes in which they were operating were externally monitored and evaluated; a point that equally applied to the provision of sexual exploitation and sexual violence services.

Both professionals and young people spoke of 'windows of opportunity' for helping young people to exit gangs and the need to capitalise on these when they did occur. It was noted that this could take different forms for different people, but the most commonly cited experiences that led to such windows of opportunity were seeing someone close to you get hurt, impending



parenthood or the first time someone is apprehended by the police.

Many young people also identified age as a significant exiting factor for some people. A number of interviewees in their late teens/early twenties had prior experience of gang-involvement, but now described themselves as having 'grown out' of this. Their retrospective narrative indicated that gang-involvement was an inherent and natural part of early/mid adolescence for them and many of their peers, but that many (though not all) left these associations and related behaviours behind as they matured and focused their attention on other things such as college and children – a process they described as 'fading away'. This is not to suggest that exiting gang-association was perceived to be a straightforward matter. Many participants also talked about other young people 'getting in too deep' – getting trapped within the gang environment due to fear, loyalty and/or the draw of money or power amongst other things – and getting 'stuck' as a result of this.

Irrespective of what might motivate a willingness to consider exiting the gang environment, there was a clear consensus across participants that young people would not be able to sustain meaningful disengagement unless proactive measures were implemented to provide them with valid alternatives for filling their time and meeting their needs:

*"Get people involved, a lot more stuff is better because I found when I did hang around with people, that when [mentor] came to my school and got me involved in stuff like drama, obviously it took me then off the street for a night so obviously I was then involving myself in other situations, which then I wasn't going out and being seen as much and doing the things that I wasn't meant to be doing. I think as well like it helps say if people have jobs because you don't have time to be doing that kind of stuff, you find most of the people are bored and don't have anything to do"* (Participant C3, 18 year old young woman)

*"After I came out of jail the second time people said you've no hope re jobs etc so I didn't try... So later on in life, after I came out the third time, my worker told me about youth work. I told him if I could, I'd do what he does, just help young people cos I think I can do that and he was like 'Yeah, yeah, you can'. His friend came in and he was like 'Yeah, I've been to jail. I did this long for this reason and I'm a youth worker now'. Since he's gone through what I've sort of gone through I said 'Yeah, if you can do it, then I most probably can'. So that's when they got me on this course"* (Participant S2, 18 year old young man)

There was a clear consensus amongst participants that in order for young people to feel able to access and engage in these – and to sustain this engagement in the longer-term – the identification of such opportunities must be accompanied by a strengths-based, resilience-enhancing approach to supporting young people who wish to exit gang environments.

## 4.6 Prevention

Given all of the aforementioned difficulties associated with identification and disclosure, and responding where concerns are identified, the importance of preventative work cannot be overestimated. The general consensus amongst participants (both professionals and young people) was that although there were currently some pockets of good practice in relation to this, these were more the exception than the norm, with considerable progress and greater investment still required.

Considering both the strengths and weaknesses of current systems, participants identified a number of principles that they felt were central to effective preventative initiatives within this field. These included:

- Sustained co-investment in universal and targeted preventative work;
- Active school engagement in preventative efforts;
- Commencing preventative work at an early age (primary school level);
- Using 'credible' individuals to deliver preventative messages;
- Supporting parents/carers to identify and respond to risk;
- Engaging the wider community in preventative initiatives; and
- Engaging young people as partners in identifying solutions, at both an individual and systemic level.

What was particularly interesting in discussions about preventative initiatives – particularly, although not exclusively, amongst young people – was the gendered analysis offered in relation to this. When thinking about preventative work in relation to gangs, participants focused their discussions on young men, with only limited attention paid to the need to educate young women about the potential risks of gang-involvement or association. Conversely, when thinking about preventative work in terms of sexual violence and exploitation, the vast majority of participants' discourse related to young women with little attention paid to the need to educate young men about sexual violence either in terms of their potential victimisation of this or in terms of responsibility for perpetrating this. This may in part be due to the fact that this is how many current preventative initiatives are configured, but the failure to challenge these gendered constructions holds serious implications for future preventative initiatives.

What was perhaps most alarming within this was the fact that when asked what we could do about these issues, virtually all commentary from young people located responsibility for preventing gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation with young women:

*"I think young females should be taught to have more self-respect for themselves... If you've got the willpower to say to a guy no, not even care about what he's gonna say about you, then I think once they*



*see women and young girls that have more respect for themselves, that don't take crap from no-one, then they will start respecting girls a lot more. It's all about respect. Like I was saying, girls don't respect themselves so why's a man going to respect her?... If a guy sees a girl that's got no respect for herself at all then he's gonna take advantage of that... Girls need to be taught a bit more about self-respect and self-esteem" (Participant X, 21 year old young woman)*

*"I think like there should be something in place, maybe for boys but boys are still going to go out and do what they do. I think for girls more to like build their confidence and like self-esteem and stuff like that, definitely" (Participant L2, 19 year old young woman)*

Whilst the suggestions for empowering young women and equipping them to say no when they do not wish to consent to sexual activity are critically important, without an accompanying rhetoric about the need to educate young men about their responsibility to obtain, and respect a young woman's decision about, consent they only serve to reinforce the attitudes of male entitlement and subservient female sexuality outlined throughout this report.

A number of young women who participated in the research spoke very positively of preventative group-based initiatives that they had participated in, proposing that these should be more widely available to other young women. The young men who participated in the research, on the other hand, indicated that they had few, if any, such opportunities to discuss issues of consent, healthy relationships and sexual violence. Indeed for one group of young men who participated in a focus group discussion this was their first experience of such discussions. Whilst there was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a degree of embarrassment and reticence around this, the dialogue that emerged within the group was noted to be incredibly educational for all with peers challenging one another on their attitudes to consent and sexual violence:

*"A: With some girls... you know straightaway. Like she's telling me no, then I wouldn't do anything because I'll get a rape charge but at the same time there's girls who do things like write your name on their tits and then... if they say no, you know you can still do it anyway*

*B: Yeah, if a girl don't value herself, how is you gonna expect that group of boys to value you*

*C: But what if that was your mum, or your sister?*

*D: If she's in a room with five men and she agrees to do sommat with five men, then another five jump in and she don't agree, then it's rape" (edited dialogue from young people's focus group D)*

The group later concluded:

*Both girls and boys should be having these debates, like in Year Six when they're doing sex education instead of just teaching kids about this is how you make babies... Debates about when and if it's right to have sex" (young people's focus group D)*

This failure to effectively engage young men in preventative initiatives about sexual victimisation is, of course, not an issue unique to sexual violence and exploitation within the gang environment. The need to locate these expressions of sexual victimisation within wider structures of peer-on-peer sexual violence and exploitation, and indeed wider structures of sexual violence and gender inequality in wider society, was a very strong theme that permeated through participants' discourse around preventative initiatives.

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a high-level cross-site analysis of both young people's and service responses to the issue of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation with the aim of identifying learning for embedding a more effective systemic response to these issues in the future. A number of cross-cutting challenges and learning points have been identified throughout the chapter. Proposed responses to these are now presented in the form of recommendations in Chapter Five.

# Chapter 5: Recommendations

National		Local
The current Home Office led Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People National Group should explicitly address the issue of peer-on-peer sexual violence (including that associated with gangs) as a thematic priority, with agreed cross-Departmental deliverables.	Acknowledging the issue	LSCB's should ensure that gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation is explicitly identified as a risk in all gang-affected areas. They should also ensure that all relevant strategies and operational systems are gender-proofed and address the issue within a shared framework of understanding that integrates learning and reads across the fields of child sexual exploitation, sexual violence, domestic violence and gangs.
The Association for Chief Police Officers should ensure that the existing initiative of mapping all girls and young women associated with gang-involved males is reviewed, rolled out nationally and utilised to inform Governmental responses to the issue.		LSCBs and police forces should work together to undertake regular mapping of the issue of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation – and all individuals potentially affected by this - within their local area as a basis for developing appropriate service responses. This must include the valuable knowledge base held by schools and colleges, health, youth offending and voluntary sector providers.
The Secretary of State for Education should ensure that a 'whole school approach' to safeguarding is consistently adopted to address all forms of sexual violence and exploitation, including sexualised bullying and coercive behaviours. All such initiatives should be delivered to both young men and young women in gender and age-appropriate forms. This work should link with other education, youth service and relevant universal service providers to promote a better understanding of healthy relationships and consent to sexual activity.	Enhancing preventative initiatives	LSCBs should facilitate local multi-agency training opportunities so staff from different professions can meet to consider their shared responsibilities in identifying, and working with, gang-affected young men and young women at risk of sexual violence or exploitation
The Cabinet Office should produce a strategy on the development of robust long-term youth work (prioritising community based youth work, detached youth work, youth mentoring systems and gender based violence awareness interventions) to engage with young people, their peers, families and wider community in gang affected neighbourhoods.		Community Safety Partnerships in gang-affected areas should develop an action plan for how they can more effectively engage parents/carers and the wider community in preventing gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation, and other forms of harm associated with gangs
National bodies with responsibility for training professionals should evidence how they incorporate peer-on-peer sexual violence (including that associated with gangs) into pre- and post-qualifying programmes.		Subject to the local assessment of need, service providers should explore the potential of engaging young people as mentors and advocates, as recommended by the young people who participated in the research. Recognising the complexity and resource-intensiveness of this role, any such scheme should be grounded in specialist training (including understanding of gender-based violence), intensive support and supervision and evaluation.
<p>The Home Office should develop recommended principles to underpin all national and local responses to gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation, with a view to informing the commissioning of services and disseminating best practice. These principles should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) effective inter-agency working;</li> <li>(b) engaging young people as active partners;</li> <li>(c) sustainability;</li> <li>(d) prevention and early intervention;</li> <li>(e) clear pathways into support services;</li> <li>(f) the complexity of the victim/perpetrator dynamic within peer-on-peer sexual violence.</li> </ul>	Responding to risk	LSCBs should review their current policies and operational systems to ensure that they have appropriate inter-agency systems in place regarding common thresholds of intervention, shared assessment of risk and clear referral pathways for both young men and young women, and those perpetrating and experiencing sexual violence.
		Directors of Children's Services should ensure that all victims of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation within their area have access to a trained and supported practitioner who will support them in a crisis, advocate on their behalf, and provide long-term consistent support. They should also ensure that all such programmes of work are independently reviewed to ensure consistency of provision to young people in need.

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